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0521429145 - Hegel's Social Philosophy: The Project of Reconciliation - Michael O. Hardimon

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INTRODUCTION

The central aim of Hegel's social philosophy was to reconcile his contemporaries to the modern social world. Hegel sought to enable the people of the nineteenth century to overcome their alienation from the central social institutions – the family, civil society, and the state – and to come to 'be at home' within them. 'The project of reconciliation' is the name I have given to this enterprise. My aim in this book is to explain what the project of reconciliation is.

I

Hegel's project merits close examination for at least three sorts of reasons. The first has to do with our own cultural concerns – concerns that might equally well be classified as 'political' or 'personal.' Our social world – the present-day social world of Europe and North America – is a world of alienation (*Entfremdung*). It characteristically gives rise to the felt experience of alienation. Many people feel 'split' from its institutions, regarding them as foreign, bifurcating, and hostile or indifferent to their needs. Many people also feel split within themselves, divided by the conflicting aims of realizing their individuality and being members of the community.¹ Not everybody

¹ Hegel does not, it is true, use the word *Entfremdung* to describe this form of division. Moreover, the structure of this form of division differs from the structure of the form of consciousness he discusses in the section of the PhG entitled "Self-

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feels this way, of course, but many do. A felt sense of division and conflict is a pervasive feature of our world.² Alienation is a problem for all of us in the sense that it is a problem of *our* culture. Not the least reason for looking at the project of reconciliation, then, is that it addresses a problem that is – or ought to be – of concern to us.

A closely related reason for looking at Hegel's project is that it articulates an ideal that is of interest to us: the ideal of reconciliation. We may not initially think of ourselves as caring about reconciliation, but an interest in reconciliation flows naturally out of concern with alienation. 'Reconciliation' (*Versöhnung*), as Hegel uses it, is a technical term referring to the process of overcoming alienation.³ It is the process of overcoming the splits that divide the self from the social world and the attendant splits that divide the self from the self. Reconciliation is also the state in which the process of overcoming alienation results – the state that Hegel characterizes as being at home in the social world. In Hegel's view, the experience of alienation is directed toward the ideal of reconciliation, and the ideal of reconciliation is contained within the experience of alienation. Looking at Hegel's project can help us understand what reconciliation is. His project seeks to show that reconciliation represents a coherent and attractive aspiration – an important social ideal. Hegel's project can help us articulate an aspiration we may implicitly hold, allowing us to add reconciliation to our vocabulary of social ideals.

alienated Spirit" ("Der sich entfremdete Geist"; PhG, 359-441/294-363). Nonetheless, it is clear – and uncontroversial – that Hegel's social philosophy is meant, among other things, as a response to the problem that is now standardly called alienation. For Hegel's general view that modern social life is characterized by splits and divisions, see the early D (20–2/89–91) and the much later VA (1:81/1:55), constructed by H. C. Hotho from his notes on Hegel's lectures. For a useful discussion of the philology of the word 'alienation', see Schacht 1971.

- 2 I emphasize the felt experience of alienation because it provides a natural starting place for thinking about Hegel's project. But it is important to note that although Hegel thinks that alienation can be manifested in people's feelings, he does not regard it as a mere feeling. What is centrally at issue for Hegel in determining whether people are alienated or at home in the social world is their *structural relation* to the central social institutions. This topic is taken up in Chapter 3.
- 3 It should be noted here at the outset that the negative connotations of the English word 'reconciliation' (e.g., the suggestion of resignation) are not shared by *Versöhnung*, the German word Hegel uses, which is far more positive than the English and essentially involves an element of affirmation. The differences between 'reconciliation' and *Versöhnung* are discussed briefly in Chapter 1 and at greater length in Chapter 3.

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Hegel's project does not, however, speak directly to us. The people Hegel seeks to reconcile are his contemporaries, the people of the nineteenth century.⁴ And the social world he seeks to reconcile them to – the social world of the nineteenth century – is presumably rather different from our own. The state, as he represents it, is a (constitutional) monarchy; the rural nobility and the peasantry constitute important social groups; and women are excluded from civil society and the state. We cannot assume that the alienation experienced by people in Hegel's world is identical to the alienation experienced by people in ours. Nor can we assume that the answers Hegel offers to the problem of alienation in his social world will answer the problem of alienation in ours. Nonetheless, the general problem that pushes Hegel's project, *alienation*, and the general ideal that pulls it, *reconciliation*, are matters of concern to us, and this gives us a reason to examine Hegel's project. Moreover, even if the social world Hegel seeks to reconcile his contemporaries to is not identical to our own, it is not radically different from it either. It is a world that includes the nuclear bourgeois family, the modern market, and the modern political state. Not the least important thing we can get from reading Hegel is insight into the structure of our social world.

The second category of reasons for looking at Hegel's project is scholarly. Reconciliation is the main goal and central organizing category of Hegel's social philosophy (PR, ¶14, §360). It is also the main goal and central organizing category of Hegel's philosophy as a whole (VA, 1:81/1:55; VG, 78/67; VGP, 3:69/3:165).⁵ If we want to understand Hegel's social philosophy, we must understand the role that reconciliation plays within it. In considering Hegel's social philosophy as a project of reconciliation, we attempt to understand it through its aim – an approach that provides an especially illuminating way of thinking about his philosophy's shape and structure. Focusing on reconciliation can also help us understand what makes Hegel's social philosophy distinctive – for the emphasis his social philosophy places on reconciliation is clearly one of its most distinctive features.

4 A more precise specification of Hegel's audience is provided in Chapter 4, section I.

5 The project of reconciling people to the social world is one part of the larger project of reconciling them to the world as a whole, which is, in turn, a part of the still larger project of reconciling *Geist* (spirit, mind) to the world as a whole and thereby to itself.

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Interpreting Hegel's social philosophy as a project of reconciliation has the further advantage of making it possible to avoid placing Hegel in one or the other of two established drawers: progressive or conservative, liberal or communitarian. At the same time, this approach helps us understand the compulsion to pigeonhole him in this way. A focus on reconciliation brings the opposing tendencies of his social thought – progressive *and* conservative, liberal *and* communitarian – into clearer view. This tack similarly enables us to avoid the temptation of reading Hegel as either a left or a right Hegelian (as an advocate of criticism and revolution or an advocate of quietism and accommodation).⁶ The project of reconciliation is, among other things, an attempt to reconcile the conflicting political tendencies (toward criticism and quietism, revolution and accommodation) that, taken by themselves, lead in the directions of left and right Hegelianism. To the extent that we view Hegel as engaged in the project of reconciliation, we can see him, not as a left or a right Hegelian, but instead as a *Hegelian*.

Obviously, the idea that Hegel's social philosophy is a project of reconciliation is one among many possible interpretations. One could, for example, make Hegel's notion of *Geist* (mind, spirit) the central concept of one's interpretation. Hegel uses *Geist* to refer to human individuals, to human culture and society, and to God. Or one could attempt to construe Hegel's social philosophy in terms of the "categories" (*Denkbestimmungen*) of Hegel's *Science of Logic* – his account of the determinations of thought he regards as delineating the fundamental structure of the self and the world. Or again, one might try to make Hegel's concept of freedom the center of one's exposition. The advantage of starting with reconciliation rather than *Geist* or the *Science of Logic* is that doing so makes it easier to see Hegel's social thought as rooted in a set of concerns we share with him: alienation and the wish to overcome it. The advantage of starting with reconciliation rather than freedom is that doing so makes it easier to escape the tightly closed circle of notions within which Hegel works, and so makes it easier for us to get an initial purchase on his thought.

That reconciliation is central to Hegel's social philosophy is a familiar idea in the literature. Scholars have long recognized that reconciliation is the central aim of Hegel's social philosophy and

6 For discussions of left and right Hegelianism, see Crites 1967; Löwith 1941, 1964; and Toews 1980.

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of his philosophy as a whole.⁷ But the point of studying Hegel, like that of studying any other important historical philosopher, is not to come up with radically new and different things to say; rather, it is to deepen our understanding of his view. Thus it is by no means distressing that the claim that reconciliation is central to Hegel's social philosophy is not new. It would rather be cause for worry if no one had appreciated the importance of reconciliation before. But it is one thing to recognize in a general way that reconciliation is the aim of Hegel's social philosophy and another to give this point content. That this idea is familiar does not mean that it has been properly understood. I believe that this idea still stands in need of philosophical clarification. I also believe that there is still a need for a systematic account of Hegel's social philosophy *as* a project of reconciliation.⁸ My aim in this book is to address this dual need.

In any case, the very idea that Hegel's social philosophy can be taken seriously as a project of reconciliation has recently become controversial. In his excellent book *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, Allen Wood acknowledges that Hegel's social philosophy aims at reconciliation. He says that "Hegel seeks to overcome alienation by rationally reconciling us to the world, comprehending a divine reason, akin to our own, immanent in it." But then he goes on to say:

Few of Hegel's readers today find it natural to adopt rational theodicy as their fundamental relation to their cultural predicament. Accordingly, they should be more willing than he was to consider Hegel's conception of the vocation of modern individuals and its fulfillment in the modern state in their practical meaning – as a project in rational ethics. To read Hegel in this way is, admittedly, to read him in some measure against his own self-understanding; it is nevertheless *the only way* in which most of us, if we are honest with ourselves, *can read him seriously at all*.⁹ (My emphasis)

It will come as no surprise that I think Wood wrong on this point. But Wood makes it clear that the idea that Hegel's social philosophy can be taken seriously as a project of reconciliation is something that needs to be shown. One of my central aims in this book is precisely to show that – and how – it can.

7 Recent commentators include Pippin (1981, 510), Taylor (1989, 430), and Wood (1990, 6).

8 Plant (1973) emphasizes the idea of reconciliation in Hegel's social thought, but I have tried to provide a treatment of the topic that is more analytical and systematic.

9 Wood 1990, 8.

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The third sort of reason for looking at Hegel's project is philosophical. Reconciliation represents an important philosophical topic in its own right. One philosophical reason for looking at Hegel's project is for the light it sheds on this topic. But, of course, reconciliation is not generally recognized as an important philosophical field of inquiry by analytical philosophers. Indeed, within the analytical tradition, reconciliation is not generally recognized as a philosophical concern at all. This suggests a somewhat different reason for looking at Hegel's project: doing so may enable us to see that reconciliation is in fact an important topic for philosophy.

It should be clear why one might want to make reconciliation an object of philosophical reflection. Reconciliation is an important cultural, political, and personal concern, and thinking about such concerns is a traditional aim of philosophy. One of the perennial sources of attraction of Hegel's writing consists in its attempt to address important matters of cultural, political, and personal concern in a philosophical way.

It may also help to note that concern with reconciliation is not as far removed from mainstream analytical work as one might initially think. Thus, for example, John Rawls maintains that one of the various roles that political philosophy has as a part of culture is "reconciliation" – a role that he notes was emphasized by Hegel. "Political philosophy calms our frustration and rage against our social world by showing us the way in which its institutions, when properly understood from a philosophical point of view, are rational."¹⁰ Moreover, reconciliation can be seen as forming an important concern within the tradition of modern political philosophy, which analytical philosophers recognize as their own. Rousseau, Kant, and Marx all offer visions of reconciliation, broadly understood.

But in order to make good on the claim that the topic of reconciliation is genuinely philosophical, it is not enough to name names or point to a tradition: the claim that the topic is genuinely philosophical is something that must be shown. The best way to do that is to put the notion of reconciliation to philosophical work. And the best way to do that is to look at Hegel. Hegel was the first modern thinker explicitly to claim that reconciliation is the proper aim of political philosophy. His is the deepest and most comprehensive philosophical treatment of this problem available. If under-

10 Rawls 1987, 1.

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standing Hegel provides a *historical* reason for looking at the project of reconciliation, understanding how reconciliation could be a philosophical topic constitutes a *philosophical* reason for looking at Hegel.

A closely related philosophical reason for examining Hegel's project is that it raises an important philosophical question. Hume asked: What is causation? Wittgenstein asked: What is it to follow a rule? The philosophical question Hegel asks is: Can I be reconciled to the social world?

One difference between Hegel's question and the questions Hume and Wittgenstein posed stands out immediately. Unlike the questions they posed, Hegel's question does not belong to the recognized philosophical canon. But, of course, one of the basic motivations for turning to the history of philosophy is precisely to expand our sense of what the philosophical questions are. Serious work in the history of philosophy begins in the conviction that philosophers of the past can help us in this endeavor. To my mind, the most important philosophical lesson we can draw from Hegel's social philosophy is that Can I be reconciled to the social world? is an important philosophical question. Showing the philosophical interest and importance of this question is another of my aims in this book.

The way in which I propose to show the philosophical interest and importance of this question is by showing that it allows of an interesting philosophical answer: the answer that Hegel gives. In this respect my approach to Hegel's social philosophy reverses the usual order of things: my presentation of Hegel's *answer* is driven by the aim of motivating his *question*. I am far more concerned with showing that his question is philosophically interesting and important than in establishing the correctness or incorrectness of his answer. Indeed, one of my central aims is to show that we can regard this question as philosophically important even if we do not finally accept the answer that Hegel gives. This does not mean, however, that we can simply ignore Hegel's answer. On the face of things the question, Can I be reconciled to the social world? is extremely abstract and general. It is not initially clear what is being asked when these words are uttered. Nor is it immediately clear what would count as a possible answer. Still less is it initially obvious what turns on the question being answered one way or the other. In order to appreciate the philosophical force of Hegel's question, we must work our way through the details of his view.

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In what follows I present a *philosophical reconstruction* of Hegel's project. If we are to see Hegel's answer to the question as a philosophical response, we must be able to understand it. And before his answer can be understood, it must be reconstructed. Hegel's technical vocabulary is too obscure to be used without clarification and too foreign for those of us trained within the analytical tradition to ever take it over as our own. My guiding principle has been to avoid using Hegel's technical vocabulary, to minimize reliance on his metaphysics, and to present his view in terms that we can understand. One consequence of this decision is that the language and structure of my presentation differ dramatically from Hegel's own. My hope is that the gains in clarity and perspicuity will offset the regrettable loss of connection with his text. My aim of presenting Hegel's view clearly and intelligibly forces me to forgo making exegesis a central part of my discussion. The interpretation provided in this book is rooted in close readings of the text, but extended textual discussion would ensnare us in the very aspects of Hegel's prose the reconstruction is meant to avoid.

In addition to reconstructing the terminology of Hegel's discussion, this book also reconstructs its structure. Although the notion of reconciliation is absolutely central to Hegel's thought, his own exposition obscures the central role it plays. The reconstruction provided in this book brings the centrality of this notion into plain view. It is designed to make the role that reconciliation plays in Hegel's social philosophy transparent. It is meant to make it possible for us to see his social philosophy *as* a project of reconciliation.

One crucial substantive respect in which my account is a reconstruction is that it abstracts the project of reconciling people to the social world from the two larger projects of which it is a part: the project of reconciling people to the world as a whole and the project of reconciling *Geist* to the world as a whole and to itself. My central focus is on the relation of people to the modern social world.

I should note that for the most part I deliberately avoid engagement in scholarly disputes. I do so not out of ingratitude, indifference, or hostility to Hegel scholarship but rather with the aim of presenting as clear and uncluttered a reconstruction of Hegel's view as possible. This book is intended to be a contribution to the scholarly study of Hegel, but the contribution it seeks to make is not itself scholarly. I mean to contribute to the scholarly study of Hegel by

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presenting an account of his project of reconciliation that is especially clear and illuminating. I hope that by giving shape, clarity, and form to the familiar idea that reconciliation is the main goal and central organizing category of Hegel's social philosophy, my reconstruction will make it possible for scholars to see Hegel's social philosophy in a new and different way.

Throughout the book I seek to observe the principles of intelligibility and fidelity. The principle of intelligibility requires that Hegel's thought be presented in a manner that is clear and understandable. The principle of fidelity requires that one remain faithful to the distinctive character of his thought. My fundamental interpretive task is to manage the tension between these two principles. My goal is to present a Hegel that is both understandable and Hegelian.

Characterizing my enterprise as a 'philosophical reconstruction' could be misleading, since there are at least two ways in which it differs from 'philosophical reconstruction' as standardly practiced. First, I do not attempt to transform Hegel into a contemporary. The Hegel I 'reconstruct' remains someone whose philosophical views and approach to philosophy are strikingly different from our own. The point of my reconstruction is to facilitate – not obviate – contact with the 'otherness' of his thought. Approaching Hegel, like approaching Plato, Aquinas, or Descartes, involves entering a foreign philosophical world; my reconstruction seeks to respect this fact. Second, this book does not attempt to reconstruct Hegel's philosophy as providing answers to the questions that are generally regarded by contemporary philosophers as being philosophical. It seeks instead to learn from Hegel what *he* took the philosophical questions to be and to reconstruct the answers that he gives in a form we can understand.

One other point needs to be made clear at the outset. My aim in this book is to reconstruct *one central aspect* of Hegel's social philosophy: his attempt to reconcile people to the modern social world. This book does not purport to give a complete account of Hegel's thought. Nor does it attempt to discuss Hegel's social and political philosophy in a comprehensive way. It seeks instead to pursue in some depth one single strand of Hegel's thought, in the hope that doing so will illuminate his thought as a whole.¹¹

11 Taylor (1975) offers what is perhaps the best general discussion of Hegel's philosophy. Plant (1973) offers an excellent general discussion of Hegel's political philosophy. The best general account of Hegel's ethical theory is to be found in Wood 1991.

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From a textual standpoint, my discussion restricts itself to Hegel's *Rechtsphilosophie* (philosophy of right), the social philosophy he presented in the *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse* (1821),¹² in the section "Der objektive Geist" of the *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, vol. 1 (1817, rev. 1827, 1830), and in the lectures given in Heidelberg and Berlin between 1817 and 1831. I have decided to concentrate on this section of Hegel's corpus because it constitutes the most mature and systematic presentation of his social thought and because limiting myself in this manner facilitates my attempt to reconstruct Hegel's social thought in a clear and systematic way. In any case, the *Rechtsphilosophie* is more than rich and interesting enough to sustain one book.¹³

III

This book is divided into two parts. Part I, "An Approach to Hegel's Project," provides the orientation necessary to understand Hegel's project. Chapter 1, "The Problems of Hegel's Project," begins by addressing the initial difficulties encountered in understanding the project, using them to provide an entrée into the project.

Chapter 2, "*Geist* and the *Doppelsatz*," is intended to convey a sense of Hegel's philosophical point of view by providing an account of two ideas central to that view: *Geist* (spirit, mind) and the *Doppelsatz* (the double dictum), Hegel's famous doctrine that proclaims the 'actuality' of the 'rational' and the 'rationality' of the 'actual.'

Chapter 3, "The Concept of Reconciliation," provides a preliminary account of the basic notion of Hegel's project: reconciliation. It elucidates the ordinary use of the word 'reconciliation' (and of *Versöhnung*, the German term Hegel uses) and provides a reconstruction of Hegel's technical sense of the term. It also draws a contrast between reconciliation, on the one hand, and resignation and consolation, on the other, and discusses the relation between reconciliation and happiness.

Part II, "The Project of Reconciliation," lays out Hegel's project. Chapter 4, "The Anatomy of the Project," draws on the chapters

12 For a discussion of the publication of the *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* and a statement of the view that its publication date was actually 1820, see Peperzack 1987, 1ff.

13 Readers interested in a developmental approach to Hegel's thought can profitably consult Fulda 1981 and Plant 1973.