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978-0-521-42957-3 - Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life

Robert B. Pippin

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## HEGEL'S PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

This fresh and original book argues that the central questions in Hegel's practical philosophy are the central questions in modern accounts of freedom: What is freedom, or what would it be to act freely? Is it possible so to act? And how important is leading a free life? Robert Pippin argues that the core of Hegel's answers is a social theory of agency, the view that agency is not exclusively a matter of the self-relation and self-determination of an individual but requires the right sort of engagement with, and recognition by, others. Using a detailed analysis of key Hegelian texts, Pippin develops this interpretation to reveal the bearing of Hegel's claims on many contemporary issues, including much-discussed core problems in the liberal democratic tradition. His important study will be valuable for all readers who are interested in Hegel's philosophy and in the modern problems of agency and freedom.

ROBERT PIPPIN is the Evelyn Stefansson Nef Distinguished Service Professor in the John U. Nef Committee on Social Thought, the Department of Philosophy, and the College at the University of Chicago.

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*Rational Agency as Ethical Life*

ROBERT B. PIPPIN

*University of Chicago*



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*For Joan, as ever*

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This book started out in 1990 as a book about Hegel's theory of modern "ethical life," essentially about his ethical and political philosophy. In the course of writing that book and a few preliminary articles, it became clear that Hegel's theory could not be properly understood without an appreciation of his very unusual position on the nature of human agency. More accurately, it began to seem that his ethical and political philosophy essentially *was* a theory of human agency. Such an appreciation required, in turn, a detailed treatment of the theory of freedom appealed to in that account, and what was for Hegel the most important condition for the exercise of agency as a free subject: rationality. Hegel's position on each of these issues was, to say the least, non-standard. He did not distinguish between actions and events, or agents and non-agents, on the basis of a metaphysical dualism, nor did he deny the distinction in any reductionist monism. His theory of freedom was not a voluntarist or causal theory, and neither was it a standard compatibilism. And his theory of practical rationality was not a theory of about a faculty or reflective power exercised by an individual. It soon became clear that these preliminaries required their own book-length treatment.

In completing this project over several years I incurred many debts and I am happy to acknowledge them. The new project began in earnest during a sabbatical stay in 1997–8 at the Eberhard Karls Universität in Tübingen, supported for the second time in my career by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. I am very grateful to that foundation and to my hosts and colleagues in the philosophy department, Manfred Frank, Otfried Höffe, and Anton Koch, for their hospitality and conversations during my stay there. (I am especially indebted to Tony Koch for his seminars on Hegel's *Begriffslogik* and on Robert Brandom's *Making It Explicit*.) In 2003–4 I was very fortunate to have been awarded a fellowship at the *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*, where I was able to complete several chapters of the book manuscript. The *Wissenschaftskolleg*



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is as close to an ideal research environment as I can imagine, due in large part to the extraordinary staff there and to the stimulating fellows they assemble each year. I owe that staff and the fellows in my *Jahrgang* a great debt.

While in Berlin, my friend Rolf-Peter Horstmann of the Humboldt University (whose work on German Idealism has been an inspiration for thirty years) was kind enough to organize a bi-weekly seminar of philosophers in the Berlin area. I was able to present drafts of several chapters at these seminars and profited immensely from the comments of colleagues there, especially from Dina Emundts, Rolf-Peter Horstmann, Andrea Kern, Hans-Peter Krüger, Christoph Menke, Terry Pinkard, Sebastian Rödl, and the late Rüdiger Bubner.

Another profound institutional debt is to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, whose Distinguished Achievement Award underwrote research leave over the three years from 2004 to 2007 and so much of the work on the issues discussed in chapters 6 and 9. The extraordinary generosity of the Mellon award made possible much, much else during these years, but it most importantly made possible the final work on the book manuscript.

My greatest institutional debts are to the University of Chicago and to the Committee on Social Thought. Phrases like “support for one’s research,” and a “climate of integrity and dedication,” and “constant intellectual stimulation” cannot adequately convey the uniqueness of these institutions and neither can I adequately convey how privileged I feel to be a member of such communities.

It would take at least a chapter-length narrative to thank properly the many colleagues and students to whom I am indebted. But I have to mention the following. Starting in 2004, Jim Conant at Chicago and Sebastian Rödl, now at the University of Basel, organized a “TransCoop” or international cooperation project, supported yet again by the ever-generous Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. The subject was “Transcendental Logio from Kant to Frege.” This made possible yearly meetings over several years, one year in Chicago and one year in Germany, and so another forum for trying out both my interpretation of Hegel and for evaluating the philosophical cogency of the position attributed to him. I benefited greatly from the exchanges at these meetings, particularly with Jim Conant, Paul Franks, Sebastian Rödl, Pirmin Stekeler-Weithoffer, and Michael Thompson, but above all from several sustained exchanges with John McDowell. I learned a great deal, more than I can adequately acknowledge, both from the work McDowell presented at these traveling seminars (and from his work in general) and from his

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criticisms and responses. This was equally true of a series of lectures on agency and action theory that McDowell gave at the University of Chicago in the spring of 2007.

I have been discussing Hegel with Terry Pinkard for over twenty years and continue to value greatly what I have learned from these exchanges. Here at Chicago conversations with Jim Conant in the last several years, particularly about issues in Kant and in contemporary work on perception and agency, have been very helpful, and the seminars taught in the last few years by Candace Vogler on “action-based ethics” proved indispensable in the final draft of the manuscript. I had the great privilege of several spirited exchanges about Hegel with Richard Rorty in the last years of his life, some in public, some in print, and all were very valuable. Axel Honneth invited me a few times to give lectures on Hegel’s practical philosophy at Frankfurt and I was always happy to do so. The philosophical atmosphere that Honneth has created at Frankfurt is among the most stimulating and rigorous of any I have found anywhere and I learned a great deal from conversations there, especially from Honneth. I am grateful as well for exchanges with Robert Brandom, Dieter Henrich, Jonathan Lear, Beate Rössler, Nathan Tarcov, Ludwig Siep, and Robert Stern. In ways I would not have anticipated, conversations and engagements with Michael Fried about the nature and history of modernism in painting and photography, and especially a brilliant seminar Fried gave at Chicago in 2004–5, proved extremely illuminating about a variety of issues addressed in this book. I would have approached a number of issues differently and, at least in my view, not as well had it not been for the benefit of Fried’s work, conversation, and friendship. (I am also grateful for his help in securing permission for the wonderful Menzel on the cover.) Finally, there is no way to acknowledge properly the debt I owe to graduate students in Social Thought and Philosophy over the last decade of seminars on Kant, German Idealism, and Hegel. I am especially grateful to three research assistants for their invaluable and diligent help in the preparation of the manuscript: Mark Alznauer, David Possen, and Jonathan Baskin.

Versions of some of the chapters that follow often appeared first, sometimes in very different and early form, in journals and collections and I am grateful for permission to reprint here: chapter 2 first saw the light of day in *The European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1999); chapter 7 in *The European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 8, no. 2 (August 2000); chapter 8 in *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus*

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