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.

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HEGEL’S PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

Rational Agency as Ethical Life

ROBERT B. PIPPIN

University of Chicago

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For Joan, as ever
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_Acknowledgments_  

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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 begin 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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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 Hortsmann, Andrea Kern, Hans-Peter Krüger, Christoph Menke, Terry Pinkard, Sebastian Rödl, and the late Rüdiger Bubner.

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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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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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