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## INTRODUCTION: HEGELIANISM?

The essays in this collection refer to, defend proposals about, and attempt to link two topics that have become relatively unpopular and quite variously interpreted recently: “modernism” and “Hegelianism.” The issues relevant to both terms have become so contentious that the following preliminaries are no doubt necessary.

### I

*Modernity* has come to refer both to a contested historical category and to an even more contested philosophical and civilizational ideal, some historically distinct, collective human aspiration. Various defenses and dissatisfactions with this ideal have always involved a number of explicit or implicit philosophical claims. In the essays that follow, I take issue with some prominent assessments of what is or is not philosophically at stake in the idea of a modern revolution in Western civilization, and begin to suggest an alternate view.<sup>1</sup> A reconsideration of the original German Idealist formulations of the

<sup>1</sup> These essays complement the general treatment defended in my *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) and attempt either to extend that case to other modernity theorists, or to spell out in more detail the philosophical importance of the Kant–Hegel dispute and its relevance to such theories. For a general discussion of the issues raised in that book, and a response to criticisms by

problem of modern philosophy (which I interpret as the problem of freedom), especially what I shall propose as Hegelian alternatives in such disputes, will form the basis of this discussion.

Such an approach and such a suggested response raise two immediate, potentially discussion-ending objections. To many, the idea of a topic like “philosophical modernism” is so vague and misleading that it is better avoided than embraced.<sup>2</sup> To others, perhaps the same skeptics, post-Kantian idealism is an episode in Western philosophy of interest only for historical reasons; the last attempt at systematic, a priori philosophy about “how things really are,” the very excesses of which finally revealed the foolishness of such attempts. There is not, goes the skepticism, much of value in the vague category of modernism, certainly not much promising in speculative idealism, and much that now looks historically dated and quite naive.

Consider first the historical category. However contentious the issues, there is by now a long history of interpretations and assessments of European modernism. Prominent among such narratives are explicitly philosophical treatments, and a broad consensus about the philosophical uniqueness of modern philosophy is thought to be well established. On the one hand, classic “Enlightenment” positions are marked out: the new conception of nature required by modern science; the post-Cartesian notion of mind as subjective consciousness; a political world of passion-driven but rationally calculating individuals, or a “post-Protestant” world of individually self-reliant, responsible agents; a new political language of rights and equality; and, most of all, a common hope: that a secular, rational basis for moral and political order could be found and safely relied on, could inspire the allegiance and commitment necessary for the vitality and reproduction of a society. On the other hand, there are also romantic and generally “counter-Enlightenment” (if also hypermodern) positions, positions that celebrate the priority of the imagination in any sense-making, of an organic tradition and of some sort of creative “expressivity” in accounts of meaning; a considerably more relativist and heterogeneous spirit than any single notion of modernity could encompass; a fascination with novelty; an appreciation, even celebration, of instability and change (again, though, a complex of romanticism/nationalism/pluralism issues that, by their very anti-

Kenneth Baynes, William Blattner, and David Stern, see my “Hegelianism as Modernism,” *Inquiry* 38, no. 3 (September 1995):305–327.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. H. Schnädelbach, “Die Aktualität der ‘Dialektik der Aufklärung’,” and “Gescheiterte Moderne?” in his *Zur Rehabilitierung des animal rationale* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1992).

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programmatic spirit, constitute a distinct modernist program). Besides all being matter-of-fact elements in a historical transition, raising the historian's questions about origins, precedents, and implications (and many revisionist doubts about supposed revolutionary status), each such element in a modern self-consciousness is clearly also motivated by philosophically contestable claims, and many extend a kind of philosophical promise about a better (worthier, more just, less illusory) future.<sup>3</sup> The idea of a philosophical contestation about modernity essentially involves a dispute about this sort of promise: the general claim for the universal normative superiority of distinctly modern institutions and practices.

Again, however vague the category itself, such claims have always been determinate enough to provoke grave doubts and objections. As old as the first inklings of a modern epoch is the "ancients–moderns" dispute: the insistence that the successful modern attack on many elements of pre-modern thought (or, in the original *Quarrelle*, the abandonment of classical literary models) represents a great civilizational loss. In one way or another, such a theme has resurfaced in a number of twentieth-century writers (Voeglin, Strauss, Arendt, MacIntyre, certainly Heidegger) and will no doubt remain a perennial way of raising doubts about the sufficiency of modern civilization. The same could be said with respect to religious worries about the compatibility between traditional faith and modernization.

However, many later philosophical assessments of modernism went much further. These included sweeping characterizations of modernity as

3 Admittedly, hardly anything one can say about this topic is free of controversy. Many recent British and American treatments of the problems of liberalism and modernism (e.g., the work of Berlin, Taylor, Rorty, or Williams, or even the later Rawls) begin from a deep suspicion of any "philosophical program" or conceptually unified approach to these issues, and plead for philosophical modesty, pragmatism, and a more historically concrete approach. The rough idea is supposed to be that liberal or modernist aspirations are better understood against the concrete historical alternatives out of which they developed, and not as "grounded" on any world view or philosophical program. Simply a better chance here and now (or there and then) for a better collective life, informed by the historical experience of the wars of religion, monarchical power, technological change, economic efficiency, whatever, is supposed to be what is "enough." I am not familiar with any such view that avoids what it seeks to avoid, although I do not try to demonstrate that claim here. "Less pain and suffering," "more individual freedom," "more and more diversity," and so on: all are manifestly philosophical claims about *the* most defensible aspirations of modern European civilization and, I think, should be defended as such. Doing so inevitably involves one in the systematic problems tackled with such enthusiasm in the Idealist tradition: the notions of nature, agency, sociality, religion, death, finitude, art, and so forth, which must be made coherently compatible with any such aspiration. As difficult as such systematic problems are, I see no point in trying to pretend that, armed with sound common sense, we can avoid them.

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essentially (and essentially objectionable) “Platonism,” or “Christianity,” or the “philosophy of consciousness,” or the “metaphysics of subjectivity” or of “presence,” or as the culmination of a “technological will to power,” a grossly hubristic humanism, and so forth. And, more recently, some have claimed that the appeal to a progressive modern revolution could not be disentangled from the politics of Western imperialism, and represented only a European rhetorical strategy for the sake of its own hegemonic interests.<sup>4</sup>

Still later, many such characterizations came to be associated with the view not only that modernism was ending, much as classical Greek or Roman imperial culture ended, but that a new epoch is visible, a postmodernism. This topic has already, mercifully, pretty much been talked to death, and postmodernism seems already to have suffered the fate of structuralism, semiotics, poststructuralism, and deconstruction, edged out by the new historicism, social constructivism, feminist psychoanalytic theory, postcolonialism, and so on. (“Fashion,” Leopardi reminds us, “is the mother of death.”) But such discussions represent a continuing and intellectually unavoidable reverberation of the constructions and explosions of the nineteenth century, and also count as more good evidence that such reverberations, self-doubts, and dissatisfactions will likely be with us for some time to come and cannot wholly be dismissed as academic fashion.

In other words, it is indeed true that there are so many different, often not consistent or uniform elements in intellectual and social modernity that it has taken a good while simply to sort out the meaning of rival claimants, to understand what this vastly altered situation – in religion, social life, aesthetic experience, philosophical orientation – simply means. Modernity, far from being over, has hardly had a chance to get started. And if it was true that various practices and assumptions authoritative in premodern Europe suffered a kind of crisis that made their continuation impossible, the question of what sort of response represented the best understanding of that crisis and so the most promising response, which of the many possible modern worlds would be worth the best bet, is another issue that we are still

<sup>4</sup> I mean “philosophically disentangled.” A matter-of-fact entanglement is beyond question. Hegel, for example, besides offering many sensible objections to such practices as the caste system, certainly did say many ignorant and proimperialist things about, for instance, India or Africa, especially in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*, ed. by Peter Hodgson, trans. by R. F. Brown, P. O. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart, with assistance by H. S. Harris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). But the philosophical issue concerns the issue now called “orientalism,” or whether either the very possibility of the institutions Hegel wishes to defend or the ethical norms he wishes to establish as a matter of reason logically presupposes or entails some fabulous “construction” of an inferior “other.” I know of no argument establishing such a philosophical point.

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beginning to understand, rather than ready to be done with. And there is also something manifestly suspicious in the current popularity of *so many* classifications and categories, in the very categories that inform the title of this book. After so many recent “isms” and “posts,” after so many movements and fads, so many rejoinders, so much camp warfare and sloganeering, it would be understandable if some historical nominalism now seemed more attractive, and individual authors were simply read as individual authors, contesting particular possibilities.

Although caution about the categorial issue is understandable and worthwhile, the issue itself (the sustainability, the very legitimacy of a modernist turn in philosophy) is not one that can be avoided by complaints about overly typological treatments of philosophical issues. There is, so goes the counter to such skepticism, no way to understand why even various academic problems in philosophy (like the mind–body, or other minds, or analytic–synthetic, or linguistic turn, or reductionist, or absent qualia or moral realism, or rational choice dilemma or contractarian problems) have become “our” problems, much less problems like race or gender or sexuality, without some account of who “we” have become, and that requires some position on radical historical change in philosophy, messy as that is, like it or not.

It is also true that the substantive questions at stake can lead any even vaguely “pro-modern” writer in a number of directions. Those substantive questions have to do with the right diagnosis of the putative normative or (broadly) ethical insufficiency of premodern life and the philosophical and practical/historical sufficiency of some preferred version of the modernist response. The issues are not so diverse and elusive that no comprehensive treatment is possible, and demonstrating such a possibility of comprehensive discussion is part of the task in what follows. These essays take their bearings from a particular understanding of such substantive questions, a version partly defended elsewhere, but that I hope to motivate further here. As in an earlier book, I want to continue to argue that much of the controversy about philosophical modernism, antimodernism, and postmodernism can still be profitably formulated within the framework first proposed in the German Idealist version of modernism, especially in Kantian and Hegelian discussions, especially in their discussions of agency, self-determination, and rationality, at least once many standard interpretations and dismissals of that tradition are successfully challenged. My claim throughout is a straightforward one: that various possible Idealist interpretations and justifications for foundational norms in modern thought (especially the central norm, autonomy) have not been sufficiently appreciated in

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many of the standard narratives and criticisms. So I hope to show that substantial elements of such a framework have been misinterpreted or ignored in a great many of the now relatively well known accounts offered by others, whether by Habermas, by Strauss or Blumenberg, or in various versions of Heideggerean postmodernism or Nietzschean *Kulturkritik*.

## II

It is certainly controversial to maintain that some early-nineteenth-century German philosophers had diagnosed the real intellectual sources of a modernist break with the prior religious and intellectual tradition, and that they, not Machiavelli, or the Cartesians, or the early rationalists, or Hobbes, or the Scottish Enlightenment, or the French Encyclopedists, had correctly thought through the only consistent philosophical modernism.<sup>5</sup> And there is no simple way to summarize the ideal at the heart of their revolutionary aspirations, the ideal of a wholly critical, *radically* self-reflexive or rationally “self-authorizing” philosophy. At the time, of course, such proposals were certainly interpreted as radical and dangerous. Immediately, the counterechange, that such a project finally implied a groundlessness, a foolish human willfulness, a “nihilism,” was first leveled against this version of modernism by a now relatively obscure polemicist named Friederich Heinrich Jacobi (who virtually invented the idea of slinging this particular sort of mud).<sup>6</sup> And the radical claim – that the consistent extension of the program would mean the end of all hope for rational norms, and again a kind of willful self-creation – would also soon appear. However, as noted already, if one treats the idea of modernity philosophically as well as historically, the question quickly becomes the basis for something like the moral authority of the allegiance demanded by modern institutions and practices: legal, scientific, aesthetic, as well as political and social practices. And the Idealists, Hegel especially, thought they had an answer for this question. Live this way, not that old, or these other ways, is the simple assumption that needs to be redeemed; the content of such a claim is just as easy to state. One need only

5 The writer whose work best illuminates the many dimensions of the “rival versions” of moral inquiry prominent in both the premodern and modern traditions is Alasdair MacIntyre. See especially *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

6 Good treatments of Jacobi’s role can be found in Frederick Beiser’s *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) and in Rolf-Peter Hortsman’s *Die Grenzen der Vernunft: Eine Untersuchung zu Zielen und Motiven des Deutschen Idealismus* (Frankfurt a.M.: Anton Hain, 1991).

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quote Kant: *Sapere aude!* Dare to know! In broader terms: *live freely!* And so the justificatory question came down to the nature and possibility and, especially with Nietzsche, the meaning of such an aspiration to freedom. (Nietzsche would inaugurate much of the now familiar suspicion that we did not understand well what it was that we wanted when we wanted above all to live freely, and that we can see in modern, conformist, alienated, technology-dominated, anomic, and directionless societies the fruits of such an aspiration.)<sup>7</sup>

The claim to be defended concerns why this ideal, human freedom, understood ultimately as being a law, a compelling norm, wholly unto oneself, in a wholly self-legislated, self-authorized way,<sup>8</sup> should be touted as a supreme or even absolute ideal, or that the enjoyment of many manifestly satisfying human goods, like love, friendship, security, and peace, would not be worthwhile ends to pursue were they not “truly mine,” truly legislated as ends by me. In this sense, the enemy of such a modernism (whether in the name of premodernism or postmodernism), its other, is “dogmatism,” the reliance on anything not redeemed by a reflexive account of the possibility of such reliance against possible objections, by rational justification.<sup>9</sup> The Idealists’ case is for what they called “the reality,” finally the absolute reality of such a self-determination, or freedom: that such a reflexive self-grounding could be realized systematically and in practical life. Particularly in the case of Hegel and the various left Hegelian and critical theory writers inspired by him, such an ideal was not understood as a moral claim, purely stipulated by reason, an ever distant ideal to be approximated by hopelessly irrational human beings. The claim was that modern societies themselves already depended, for the allegiance they required, the education and sanctions they legitimated, and their successful reproduction, on the realizability of such an ideal. Reality itself, modern social reality, had, in Hegel’s famous phrase, become “rational,” could only sustain and reproduce itself in a new way, by appeal to rational legitimacy and so to the capacities for free agency presupposed in such appeals. Coming to a final understanding of

7 In Nietzsche’s famous charge, the most familiar (or “bourgeois”) form of the modern aspiration – to be free from as many external constraints as possible in the pursuit of one’s wants – is the aspiration of a slavish mentality, motivated by fear and resentment and unable to sustain a civilizational project.

8 Cf. my “Horstmann, Siep and German Idealism,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1994):85–96.

9 Again, I am aware that at first pass, this characterization can seem a trivial acknowledgment of rationalism in any form. The radicality enters with the notions of completeness and so a wholly “self-authorizing” conception of rationality.

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such a reality, and appreciating its living potential in the emerging modern social and political world, was, for the classical German tradition, the unimpeachable, irrevocable achievement of modernity.

In that tradition, the possibility of such freedom is linked both to the possibility of a wholly self-authorizing or self-grounding reason (and thereby the final destruction of dogmatism, and the realization of reason's complete or "absolute" self-reliance and so "maturity"), and the possibility of a practical rationality, and therewith practical autonomy or self-legislation. As understood by Kant, the early Fichte and Schelling, and Hegel and the left Hegelians, the modern enterprise is thus inextricably tied to an essentially practical goal, what one might call a kind of "metaphysical politics": working out, articulating, helping to defend and so to realize, the possibility of free self-determination, agency, spontaneity, activity, a self-directed "purposive life," eventually (in Hegel) a necessarily collective agency.<sup>10</sup>

Such an aspiration immediately raised two extremely complicated theoretical issues. One concerned the central notion of "spontaneous" or "free" activity already mentioned, and with it (at least in the reading I want to defend in the following) the possibility of a generally non-metaphysical and non-empirical (non-psychological) account of the human thinkings and judgments and intendings supposed to be the prior conditions for the possibility of any cognitive claim or intentional deed, a "critical" or a non-metaphysical account of mentality itself. The other concerns the right way to understand the normative dimensions of such activity, the kind of subjection to rules or normative constraints characteristic of such free activity (or what a "self-imposition of norms" amounts to and requires). Both issues, without benefit of metaphysical substances and necessary properties, and without reliance on generalized laws of association or empirical psychology, raised very quickly the vexing problem of determinacy or content in such accounts of activities and norms (why *in particular* we take up the world and regulate our conduct as we do, if that taking and regulating really are "due to us"). But first, both obviously lead back to the historical and philosophical origin of such a way of posing the problem.

10 This is probably as vague and imprecise an abstraction as is necessary to launch any summary of a common ideal in this tradition. The common cause of Schelling and Hegel against Kant and Fichte, the break between Schelling and Hegel, the abandonment (or at least radical reformulation) of idealism by both Fichte and Schelling, and, of course, all the details and individual arguments are another story altogether, arguably one that still needs to be written. But some details of common heritage, and so common thematic inspiration, at least if formulated in as abstract a way, can also be brought to bear.



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There is no mystery about such an origin. The intellectual event that made possible such a claim for the priority of norm-governed activity in any account of experience or acting was Kant's 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* and the inauguration there of a "transcendental" philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Kant's successors realized at once that the implication of Kant's argument was a more comprehensive and wide-ranging revolution in conceiving mind–world and subject–subject relations than ever before effected within the Western tradition. Kant had argued that, prior to attempting to answer any question, philosophical or empirical, about the world, or the mind, or the good, the original question on which all others depended must be that concerning the "possibility" of the mind's knowledge of anything. When that question is pursued rigorously, it turns out that the possibility of any objective representation must presuppose the active role of the subject in establishing its relation to the world. No mere interaction between the world and the mind, so went the case at its simplest level, could account for such a conscious intending.

For those caught up in such ideas, these claims thus immediately closed off two already popular modern alternatives. As noted, one was a model of the world's presence to the mind common to both the emerging empiricist and rationalist traditions, one wherein "priority" in accounting for the mind's directedness toward the world, its attentiveness to the world in such and such a way, was ascribed to a direct result of the interaction between the mind and world, including special objects within the world, "ideas." The other is an attempt to account for the mind–world relation in a way we would now call "naturalistic," as if that relation, like every other, is a matter-of-fact relation whose nature and dimensions ought to be explicable according to the best available canons of matter-of-fact explanation. The Kantian point in response was the now familiar "critical" one: that such accounts beg rather than resolve the question of the possibility of an epistemic (and so *normative*) mind–world relation in the first place. (For example, Fichte's remarks against dogmatism, highlighting this ineliminable normative problem, make this point very frequently and effectively.)<sup>12</sup>

The enormously complicated case deducing the "necessary forms" of such an active taking up and conceptualizing inaugurated the Idealist revo-

11 The reading I am suggesting, which heavily stresses the deep continuities in the later Idealists with Kant's anti-empiricist and anti-realist claims, is admittedly controversial. It has been accused of making the post-Kantians *too* Kantian. See Terry Pinkard, "How Kantian Was Hegel?" *Review of Metaphysics* 43 (1990):831–8, and my response in the same issue.

12 Cf. ch. 3 of my *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 42–59.

lution. As with anyone who comes to believe that a classically empiricist or realist or naturalist account of the categorial structure of our experience was insufficient, that such conceivings cannot be said to be due wholly to the actual results of the world's impingement on our senses or mind, or due to the way the brain and body have evolved to work (that no such account could do justice to the normative status of such principles), such Idealists were faced with the task of accounting for such conceivings in radically new ways, as, somehow, results of the mind's normatively "determining itself" in its relations to nature and others. In its first manifestations, especially in the classic Kantian formulations, such a position appeared to have "cut us off" from the "world in itself," restricting claims to know our own representations (as in the first misinterpretations of Kant as a Berkleyean), or restricting cognitive claims to a "content" accessible only within a finite, distinctive "scheme." On the formal or subjective side, it wasn't long before the talk of a priority and subjective self-determination led to talk of mind itself as an intellectual intuition and of a fully systematic self-consciousness, seemingly spun out of thin air, all of which have little purchase today.<sup>13</sup>

But the philosophical problem at the heart of this enterprise, the implicit reliance by empiricist, realist, or naturalist approaches on the very normatively constrained activity denied by their positions, and its overall implications for the idea of a legitimate modern enterprise, does indeed still have a great deal of purchase. It remains a problem unavoidable for anyone dissatisfied with the resources within an empiricist or naturalist project to account for the normative dimensions of our sense-making practices, who, no matter the methodology or philosophical school, recommends, proposes, exhorts, dismisses, or even, as in the tone of some of the new naturalists, preaches.

To be a "thinker," in other words, as understood within this post-Kantian context, is to be a "judge," a maker of claims with normative force, and so the logic or "logos" of thinking must involve the logic of such normativity, the basis of our entitlement to claim to have gotten something right, that others "miss" something they "ought not" miss in avoiding such claims (something that must be far stronger than, They don't go on as we do, or Their brains are not functioning normally). In terms of the basic mind-world relation at issue, this means that even the most direct presence of the

13 I attempt to block such an inference from these sorts of Hegelian objections in Chapter 5. See also "Hegel's Original Insight," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 33 (1993):289–95, and the response there to Sally Sedgwick's objections to my reading of Hegel on spontaneity–receptivity issues, (291–5).