

Introduction

“The familiar in general is, just because it is *familiar*, not *recognized*.”¹

The question that I pose to Hegel is at first sight not one that Hegel himself seems to ask, at least not in its initial formulation. I want to know how Hegel conceives of our ordinary perspective when we are faced with the mundane task of finding our way about in our social world.² Hegel is very interested in grasping our social world, but he approaches it from a highly detached, philosophical standpoint. Whatever it is that he thinks this standpoint can contribute, it seems to differ from the one we occupy when we engage in various forms of evaluation, whether in order to determine what to do or what to continue doing, or even when we simply go about our business without engaging in overt evaluation at all. At the same time, it is not a question that falls outside of Hegel’s project, especially not outside of the *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel delivers such a philosophical account. As unparalleled as his ambitions there may be, he claims that he is merely explicating what social participants already know. In fact, he suggests that it is only philosophy of the sort he himself practices that can explicate this perspective in a way that does not distort it beyond recognition. Upon closer examination we discover a surprising thesis spanning this text, namely, that it is only the most embedded perspectives, as well as the most philosophical, that can adequately capture the rationality of what he calls modern “ethical life” (*Sittlichkeit*). Everything else is a product of the “restless activity of reflection and vanity” (PR, 17).

Hegel introduces what looks like a hierarchy in our ways of relating to ethical life, a hierarchy determined by the degree to which we reflectively relate to its laws. At the bottom is an immediate relationship, in which ethical laws “are

¹ PG ¶31 [“Das Bekannte überhaupt ist darum, weil es *bekannt* ist, nicht *erkannt*.”]

² I will frequently speak about “we” and “us.” In doing this, I am imagining Hegel as addressing a contemporary audience and as articulating a view that continues to be of relevance today. It is important to keep in mind that the ordinary standpoint that Hegel seeks to capture is contingent on inhabiting an objectively rational social order. So there is an open question about who, if anyone, does in fact inhabit such an order. But I think that certain aspects of Hegel’s view, specifically the function of critical reflection, apply even to those who do not inhabit such an order. This is all to say that the boundaries of the “we” are left deliberately hazy.

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not something alien to the subject, rather the subject bears *a witness of spirit* to them as to its own essence, in which it has its *self-feeling* and wherein it lives as in an element indistinguishable from itself – a relation that is more identical than even *belief* and *trust*” (PR §147).

That relationship, or rather that relation-less identity, in which the ethical is the actual vitality [*Lebendigkeit*] of self-consciousness, may indeed turn into a relationship of belief and trust, or a relationship mediated by *further reflection* into insight through reasons, which may also begin with certain particular ends, interests, and considerations, with hope or fear, or with historical presuppositions. But *adequate cognition* of [this relationship] belongs to conceptual thought [*dem denkenden Begriffe*]. (PR §147)

Given his order of presentation, we might assume that Hegel is telling a progressive story in which we advance to higher stages by adopting an increasingly reflective relation to ethical life. The lowest would be the one in which we fully identify with the laws we live by, in fact identify with them so thoroughly that these laws simply are our way of life. A more advanced attitude is one that is also more reflective, first attaining to the level of belief or conviction in their goodness, and next rising even higher, to an insight grounded in reasons as to why we should consider them good. The highest would be the cognition that belongs to conceptual thought, a form Hegel associates with philosophical comprehension.

But it would be a mistake to assume that mediation through *further reflection* constitutes an advance in Hegel’s eyes. There are even reasons to suspect that these reflective stages mark levels of distortion that only a philosophical account can mend.³ It would also be a mistake to think that Hegel thinks these different levels can be neatly distinguished, that they constitute discrete developmental stages. As it turns out, even this immediate relationship is already an expression of conviction and of insight and so is permeated by those attitudes that reflection can at best make explicit. Finally, this hierarchy is perhaps better described as a circle, for what the philosophical account is ultimately an

³ It may be difficult to see how an insight based on reasons could *not* constitute an advance over an unreflective attitude. But note the kinds of reasons Hegel associates with this supposed insight – reasons such as particular ends, interests, hope, fear, and historical presuppositions. This suggests that Hegel thinks this stage of “further reflection” introduces considerations that are external to the law in question. It provokes us to answer the question as to why we should follow this law, not by looking at its internal justification, but by searching out ways it promotes our self-interest. Nonetheless, Hegel does consider questions of self-interest to be legitimate ones to ask, for he insists that modern subjects demand, and have a right to demand, that their “particularity” be satisfied. See, for example, PR §124 on his gloss on the right of subjectivity, and PR §268 on his characterization of patriotism. So reflection of this sort could, again under certain circumstances, count as a legitimate exercise of this right – namely, under circumstances when this right is not already being satisfied. We usually form our particular ends, interests, hopes, etc. in a social context by situating them within institutional roles. So the two do not ordinarily conflict in a way that would call for explicit reflection.

account *of* is our embedded starting point, so the relation we had to our social world prior to explicit reflection. Hegel calls it a relation-less identity and suggests that conceptual thought is the only form that can capture it in a way that is adequate to it.

This study is an effort to understand these two ends of the spectrum, so to explain what kind of relation to ethical life each of them involves, by focusing on the status of reflection in ethical life. Its angle thus differs from studies that focus on Hegel's conception of freedom, which is usually (and rightly) taken to be the hallmark of Hegel's practical philosophy.⁴ As Hegel states in the opening pages of the Introduction: "The ground of right is the *spiritual* in general and its closest location and point of departure is the *will*, which is *free*, so that freedom constitutes its substance and determination and the system of right is the realm of actualized freedom, the world of spirit produced within itself as a second nature" (PR §4). Hegel frames the *Philosophy of Right* as an investigation into "actualized freedom": what are the conditions that make it possible for the will to be free? And he brings this question into connection with that of "right": what kind of social order actualizes a free will? This tracks "Objective Spirit" because it is concerned with delineating the objective conditions that actualize freedom, conditions such as social relations and institutions that free wills inhabit. But within this account of Objective Spirit Hegel argues that a free will must also be subjectively free. It is not enough that I inhabit an objectively freeing order, if I do not know myself to be free in it, so if I do not find my "knowledge and volition" satisfied in it. Thus Hegel can be read as investigating actualized freedom under its objective and subjective guises.

My focus on reflection is not at odds with approaches to the *Philosophy of Right* that foreground his conception of freedom, since the question of reflection is undeniably bound up with the question of freedom, especially with that of subjective freedom. Hegel frequently identifies reflection with abstraction, with the activity of detaching oneself from one's social roles for the sake of evaluation, or the activity of detaching one standard of evaluation from the social context in which it is generally found. He regards this capacity for reflection as one essential feature of the free will:

The will contains (a) the element of *pure indeterminacy* or 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,

⁴ There are a number of influential works on Hegel's practical philosophy, such as Avineri (1972), Hardimon (1994), Wood (1990), but it is Neuhauser (2000), Patten (2002), and Pippin (2008) who have emphasized Hegel's conception of freedom. More recently Moyar (2011) and Yeomans (2011) have reinvigorated this question of freedom in their interpretations of agency and practical rationality.

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is dissolved; this is the limitless infinity of *absolute abstraction* or *universality*, the pure *thinking* of oneself. (PR §5)

At the same time, Hegel is worried about its exercise. In some contexts he suggests that it tends to lead astray, motivating abstract accounts of social life, accounts that distort the objective dimension of actualized freedom. In other contexts he suggests that excessive reliance on reflection indicates that your will is not yet subjectively free. He even argues that a free will is one that proceeds unreflectively. We have evidence of it already, for the passage cited earlier identifies actualized freedom as a world that has become “second nature.” So why does Hegel identify actualized freedom with second nature, rather than with reflection? Why is this capacity for reflection nonetheless an essential feature of the free will? And when does its exercise prove productive, in Hegel’s eyes?

This set of questions already indicates how my approach to the *Philosophy of Right* will differ from much of the contemporary scholarship on this text. In an effort to demonstrate that Hegel is not a conservative who advises that we stick to our “station and its duties” or an apologist of the status quo, many have valorized reflection and granted it a central place in Hegel’s picture of ethical life.⁵ For example, some have argued that the exercise of reflection is necessary for subjective freedom, for it is only once we have reflected that we are justified in endorsing our social roles and institutions.⁶ As a consequence, Hegel’s emphasis on the unreflective, specifically on the habitual, has received relatively little attention. These approaches have thus underplayed the ambiguity in Hegel’s position. Hegel does not unequivocally favor reflection, nor does he grant it a central place in ethical life. And although he identifies the capacity for it as crucial for freedom, he is highly suspicious of its exercise. My reading seeks to make sense of the status of reflection in ethical life while taking its ambiguity and Hegel’s own ambivalence seriously. I will explain why Hegel privileges the habitual over the reflective. And I will explore what forms of reflection remain compatible with Hegel’s preferred relation to ethical life. As

⁵ Wood (1990): “Sittlichkeit, as Hegel means it, is a special kind of critical reflection on social life, not a prohibition against reflection” (196). Pippin (2008): “for Hegel freedom consists in being in a certain reflective and deliberative relation to oneself (which he describes as being able to give my inclinations and incentives a ‘rational form’)” (4). Moland (2011): “Only finally through being a reflective member of a political community are the agent’s desires fully her own; only when she is aware of political principles that best shape the life of a community can an individual be concretely free” (15). Moland even defines concrete freedom as “the individual’s ability . . . to mold her desires in such a way that she can reflectively endorse them” (17).

⁶ Patten (2002) has argued that Hegel is advocating “*complete* reflective awareness with respect to one’s determinations and the reasons underlying them, an awareness that does not stop at anything given” (44), and that “there is an important sense, for Hegel, in which freedom involves abstracting from one’s contingently given desires and inclinations and acting on the basis of thought and reason alone” (47).

we will see, some forms of reflection are not just compatible, but even vital to ethical life. In fact, what makes this conception of the embedded standpoint especially peerless is not its emphasis on the unreflective per se, but precisely its incorporation of reflection in a variety of ways. A significant portion of my study is thus devoted to investigating those modes of reflection in which Hegel thinks we do – and should continue to – engage.

I will outline and defend my project in the following order: I will begin by clarifying what Hegel means by reflection and why it introduces the difficulties he thinks it does. Here my focus will be on the structure of reflection found in Hegel's *Science of Logic* and its relevance to his practical philosophy. I will address my methodology in this study, which is to supplement the *Philosophy of Right* with appeals to other texts from Hegel's corpus, especially to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This raises questions about the scholarly claim that I am making, whether the position I go on to elaborate can be ascribed to Hegel himself or whether it is better described as Hegelian in spirit. Finally, I will offer an overview of the chapters and explain why I proceed in the order in which I do.

I.1 Reflection

The first order of business is to clarify what Hegel means by reflection, specifically in the practical context, so in the context of ethical life. The sense of reflection relevant to this context seems to be in fact quite similar to what we ordinarily mean by reflection. Although Hegel is not thinking of reflection along the lines of introspection, so as a surveying of the contents of one's own mind, he does think of it as essentially self-reflective in structure. When I reflect, I step away from an aspect of myself, usually with a critical eye. I am trying to decide whether to affirm or reject this aspect of myself, which Hegel calls my "determination." This is why Hegel characterizes reflection as an activity of abstraction – I am abstracting away from a given feature and in this way establishing a distance between myself and it. It is an act of dis-identification. And it is usually thought of as a conscious and deliberate activity.

The reason that this activity might be considered so essential to subjective freedom is that one could think that dis-identification is a necessary step in the process of rational identification. In other words, the thought is that I would have to distance myself from something in order to be in a position to affirm it on rational grounds, rather than simply because it is already my determination. It is only once I have reflected that I can proceed in a knowing fashion, rather than merely "blindly." And habit and custom tend to be identified with such blindness. This book will reject this picture on Hegel's behalf because it will challenge the assumption that we are only subjectively free in our social engagement when we have explicitly reflected on that engagement and asked

ourselves whether we should continue as we habitually or customarily do. This is not, however, incompatible with Hegel's simultaneous insistence that the free will contains a moment of (reflective) abstraction. One reason has to do with the ways in which the moment of abstraction is already present, even in unreflective forms of participation. Hegel is thinking of reflection as a more fundamental self-relation that can take covert and mundane forms and that does not require what we ordinarily think of as an act of stepping back, let alone asking whether I have good reasons for doing what I do. So the structure of reflection is already present in what looks to be unreflective, such as habitual action and customary participation. I will return to this in a moment. Another reason has to do with the dependence of reflection on objective circumstances. It is Hegel's view that reflection of the critical variety is appropriate only when the institutions in which we habitually or customarily participate have proven deficient. Such reflection is a response to an insufficiency in objective freedom, rather than a requirement of subjective freedom, even when the social world does not call for it. When reflection swings free of these objective circumstances, it is liable to create confusion that compromises our subjective freedom precisely because it obscures the rationality of ethical life, of which we are otherwise already aware.

These aspects of reflection – its basic structure as well as its perils – can be found in his general account of reflection in the *Science of Logic*. There is a big question looming over the scholarship on Hegel's practical philosophy about the relevance of the *Logic* to his *Philosophy of Right*. I will address it more directly in my final chapter, where I investigate Hegel's philosophical method and its reliance on other parts of his system. But it is a question that cannot be avoided, even at the outset, since it is in the *Logic* that Hegel delineates the structure of reflection. Here a word of caution is in order: although the kind of reflection that is at issue in ethical life will share features with reflection in the *Logic*, it is not to be conflated with it. What Hegel has in mind is a movement that need not be conscious at all. It is a movement that can be discerned in any object that is capable of transforming into something else while remaining what it is, so retaining its identity in the face of differentiation. Even a tree undergoes reflection when it grows from a seed but remains the same plant. So it is not an activity that is characteristic of human beings and is not limited to their self-critical capacity for abstraction.

Reflection in the *Logic* appears in the context of his "logic of essence" because it is in the service of capturing this elusive "essence." This is a highly technical problem in Hegel's *Logic* that emerges in the transition from "being" to "essence," so in the effort to give determinacy to "being." In this context Hegel defines reflection as a *movement* – by which he means a transformative process – that involves creating differences (through negation) and overcoming them (by negating the negation). It is a fundamentally negative transformation,

one that consists in positing a “seeming”⁷ (*Schein*) that is *not* identical with one’s “essence” (*Wesen*) and then overcoming this negative relation to one’s own “seeming” by negating it and recognizing that I am indeed as I “seem” to be. Thus, according to Hegel, it is ultimately a “movement from nothing to nothing” (WL II, 24), since neither my essence nor my seeming can be independently defined. Each only makes sense when contrasted with the other (through reflection), though reflection at the same time reveals that the needed contrast cannot be maintained. It is a “movement from nothing to nothing, and thereby back to itself” (WL II, 24).⁸

Before I briefly summarize Hegel’s argument, it is worth noting that this account of reflection has two practical applications that will become relevant for us.⁹ First of all, Hegel’s account is meant to show how reflection can be present in activities that appear unreflective, so how a similar structure can permeate a process even when it is not being thematized or foregrounded in a self-conscious manner. The movement of reflection is for Hegel far more basic than its self-conscious exercise.¹⁰ In my first two chapters, but especially in the second, I will point it out in seemingly unreflective forms of social participation. Second, Hegel’s account also investigates the problems that reflection can generate, thus shedding light on his own hesitations about its practical exercise. In other words, Hegel wants to demonstrate what makes reflection a potential source of distortion and instability. Thus this account of reflection gives us a clue as to how reflection can be both indispensable and pernicious.

The logical account exposes the essentially self-reflective nature of reflection. Hegel is here outlining an act of distancing oneself from oneself and then

⁷ There is no obvious English equivalent of *Schein*. I have chosen to translate it as “seeming,” though there are more skeptical (“illusory being”) and less skeptical (“show”) translations on the table. It is important to keep in mind that *Schein* is not as such meant to have negative connotations. Although it is distinct from essence, it would ideally allow essence to “shine through.”

⁸ “Das Werdem im Wesen, seine reflektierende Bewegung, ist daher die *Bewegung von Nichts zu Nichts and dadurch zu sich selbst zurück*” (WL II, 24).

⁹ Yeomans (2011) makes Hegel’s account of reflection in the *Science of Logic* central to the question of practical agency. As he puts it, “Self-determination seems to require not just that I am able to identify with my actions retrospectively, but that my reflection on my action plays some role in future actions” (15). But, unlike me, he reads the chapter on reflection specifically with an eye to its relevance to the problem of free will, so to Hegel’s compatibilism: “Because the categories of essence come in these weighted pairs, we are always explicitly creating and interpreting at the same time. As a matter of everyday life of reflection, this seems unexceptionable. But as a matter of basic conceptual structures, it seems miraculous” (57).

¹⁰ This could raise the question of why we would want to call both movements’ instances of “reflection,” since only one is self-conscious, while the other is not. They seem to be quite different in kind. I think the reason Hegel has for calling both instances of reflection is because they share a structure. Hegel is interested in this isomorphism of which any being that undergoes transformation while maintaining its identity is capable. Thanks to Karen Ng for raising this question.

overcoming this distance by recognizing that that from which one has distanced oneself is nothing other than oneself. So reflection is self-reflection, a relation one establishes to oneself, even when it is not conducted in a self-conscious manner. It can best be visualized through one's relation to one's own mirror image. When I look in the mirror, I see myself, but as another – an image that now stands over and against me. In this way I have established a distance between myself and my “seeming” (or “appearance,” as the term is sometimes translated). This introduces the question: am I really identical with my mirror image, or not? Is my mirror image me, or is it something other than me? This dimension will become relevant to practical forms of reflection because they will also be essentially self-reflective in structure. When I engage in reflection in ethical life, I am distinguishing myself from an aspect of myself, standing apart from it, in an effort to determine whether it is something that I can affirm. This is another way of raising the question of whether it really is *me* or not, whether it expresses my essential nature.

What Hegel explores in the *Logic* is the instability that reflection generates through this movement of stepping away from one's own mirror image. As we have seen, reflection is responsible for establishing the basic distinction between “essence” and “seeming.” Essence refers to what something really is, and seeming refers to how it seems to be, though it remains an open question whether the way it seems to be is as it really is. So seeming and essence could in principle coincide. Nevertheless, Hegel thinks that the mere act of drawing this distinction already introduces a kernel of skepticism, because to call the appearance of an object a mere “seeming” is to discredit this appearance as a manifestation of essence.¹¹ This means that to speak of an essence only makes sense so long as essence is being contrasted with seeming. At the same time, an essence cannot be completely disassociated from seeming either, for it must be visible in (“shine through”) the way the object seems to be.¹² As Hegel puts it, “the seeming in the essence is not the seeming of another, rather it is the seeming in itself, the seeming of the essence itself” (WL II, 22). What Hegel concludes, to jump a few steps ahead, is that the skepticism introduced by the act of drawing such a distinction eventually collapses this very distinction, showing it to be insufficient for the task of determining an object.

Hegel suggests that the ultimate untenability of this distinction can be traced back to the instability at the core of this reflective movement. The essence of

¹¹ Hegel explicitly associates this talk of “seeming” with both skepticism and idealism. See WL II, 20.

¹² Pippin (1989) explains this identity of seeming and essence through the example of the essence of a person (his character): while a person's essence needs to be distinguished from his deeds, it must nevertheless animate his deeds and give unity to his conduct. So there is no “inner self” that can remain wholly inner and unexpressed (206).

an object, if it is to have one, cannot be something immediately given, but must first be determined through an activity of abstracting from what is immediately given and figuring out the essence on its basis. This, again, presupposes a connection between seeming and essence, because it assumes that seeming can be treated as an expression of essence, that the essence can be discovered in the seeming. At the same time, such an activity requires something to abstract *from*, so it demands a fixed starting point from which an essence can be determined in the first place, a starting point that is not itself the product of this activity. In this respect, reflection banks on the persistent contrast between something that is merely given, which can serve as its point of departure, and something that is eventually derived through reflection itself.

In characterizing this activity as a “movement of nothing to nothing, and so back to itself,” Hegel means to suggest that, when we engage in reflection, neither essence nor seeming present us with a stable reference point, because each already presupposes the other and is only meaningful in relation to the other. In other words, neither can be taken independently for granted. In its three variations – positing, external, and determining – reflection falls prey to a perpetual effort to fix such a point of departure from which to proceed, while failing to recognize that every starting point is precisely already its own product.¹³ In this light “external reflection” proves most paradigmatic,¹⁴ because this reflecting activity takes something to be given – something from which it can then proceed to abstract an essence – without recognizing that the act of taking something as given is itself an act and the status of givenness is one that this activity itself bestows. What makes this form of reflection “external” is its conviction that this activity is not implicated in its starting point, but merely abstracts from what is already there, independently of it. This involves a failure to see that the seeming is itself only a seeming from the standpoint of reflection, so from a standpoint that assumes that there is an essence to be discerned in the first place, and that this essence better be distinguished from what is immediately

¹³ In positing reflection, we think we can uncover the essence without taking anything for granted, but what we take for granted is that there is an essence to uncover. In external reflection, we accept that we must start with something, namely the way something seems, and then determine the essence of its basis. But here we likewise fail to see that seeming is also a product of reflection, because it only makes sense to describe a set of features as the way something seems to be once we have already drawn the distinction with essence. In determining reflection, we accept that seeming and essence are both products of reflective activity, but we then lean on the “determinations of reflection,” i.e., the laws of thought, as the fixed, stable, and given reference point.

¹⁴ As Hegel puts it, “External reflection was also what was meant, when reflection in general, as was the trend for a while in contemporary philosophy, was blamed for all evil and was regarded with its determination as the antipode and nemesis of the absolute perspective” (WL II, 31). In fact, his own use of the term “reflection” in his early publications, such as the *Differenzschrift*, could have served as an example of this “trend in contemporary philosophy.”

given.¹⁵ It is the reflective stance that generates the contrast, and so pits the way something seems against the way it really is. Reflection can take neither for granted, because both – the status of being an essence as well as the status of being a seeming – are artifacts of this very activity.

As we can see, Hegel’s official story about the perils of reflection is both highly abstract and wedded to a particular theoretical problem of lending determinacy to an object, making its relevance to the practical context not directly apparent. But I think there are several respects in which this story can help us see what Hegel means in characterizing reflection in the *Philosophy of Right* as a “restless activity,” and one that tends to leave us empty-handed. The first has to do with the skeptical kernel that reflection introduces and ultimately dissipates far and wide. According to Hegel, to be skeptical about the way things seem, and to hunt for an essence concealed by appearance, is to invoke an unstable and destabilizing distinction that tends to erode our confidence in all seemings, robbing us of any resources with which to discern an essence in the first place. In the practical context, it would be to seek the authority, the “essence,” of our ethical laws behind, beneath, or above those laws themselves, thus neglecting what he calls their “internal rationality,” which is already exhibited (and so “appears”) in our pre-reflective modes of engagement. We were already justified in heeding them, whereas reflection leads us to suspect that they need to be justified from scratch, so without recourse to the reasons we already had for doing what we do.

The second has to do with the specific lesson from “external reflection,” which was unable to see *itself* in its object of investigation. The way Hegel puts it in the *Science of Logic* is perhaps less helpful here, since Hegel’s point there is simply that, whatever we take to be given is something *we take* to be given. Its status of givenness is an artifact of our reflective activity. In the *Philosophy of Right*, I think, Hegel is worried about a deeper entanglement with our object of assessment. He thinks that, when we adopt a reflective stance toward ethical life, we are inclined to treat it as a burden with which our predecessors have saddled us. We fail to see that ethical life is itself a “spiritual” achievement and so expresses deliberate efforts to shape a rational social order.¹⁶ More importantly, we fail to see that ethical life is “spiritual” in a further sense, namely, that it is one with which we do already identify and are right to identify. This identification is one that reflection itself either obscures or discredits. So this

¹⁵ “Reflection thus finds the immediate as given, which it moves beyond and from which it returns. But this return is first the presupposing of what is given. This given *becomes* only given in the act of being left behind; its immediacy is the sublated [*aufgehobene*] immediacy” (WL II, 27).

¹⁶ This is one way to make sense of Hegel’s complaint that we see the ethical world as “god-forsaken” [*gottverlassen*] (PR, 16).