

# Freedom and Universality: Hegel's Republican Conception of Modernity

Michael J.  
Thompson

**Abstract:** I argue that Hegel's political philosophy can be seen as having a republican structure. I contend that a reading of Hegel's political philosophy must begin with exploring the metaphysical infrastructure of his ideas about human life and the essential sociality of what it means to be a human being. This constitutes an ontological structure to our sociality, one that, once it achieves cognitive reflection in the subject, becomes the basis for an expanded form of agency and individuality. This provides us with the requisite basis for reworking the ideas about individuality, freedom, the state and the common good that provides us with a thoroughly modern form of republicanism. Hegel's political philosophy can therefore be shown, through its metaphysical structure, to endorse a modern form of republicanism and serve as a critical bulwark against the limitations of modern liberalism.

**Keywords:** Hegel, republicanism, metaphysics, social ontology, individuality

## I. The Problem of Modernity

Perhaps one of the central problems that confronts the project of modernity has been its capacity to instantiate its core, self-proposed goal of the rational society. Through the trials and tribulations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the vicissitudes of progress and reaction, liberalism has emerged as the dominant mantle upon which this project of political and social rationalism now rests. Liberalism has been the primary political theory that has guided the pursuit of this ideal. For modern liberals, the essentially rational character of its commitments consists in its protection of private property, a basic respect for persons, legal equality and equality of opportunity, a social ontology of particularist individuals and their particularist conceptions of the good, as well as a formal and ethically neutral conception of law and the state. It leaves the overall purposes and ends of the society to the "free" choice of its members. They consent to their relations of authority – to political leaders and so on – and relate to one another through rational contract in the economic sphere. But there are to be no collective ends or purposes, no content to what the society is to pursue. The good is formal, subjective, and politics is the sphere that should allow me to pursue that personal conception of the good.

I would like to challenge this liberal account of modernity and instead suggest that it represents its defective expression. As I see it, Hegel's entire political philosophy shreds this conception of modern

society and sees something far more compelling and rich. Hegel offers us a very different path to a rational, modern way of life rooted in the basic principles of republicanism: of the commitment to a common purposes and good to which individuals would be able to organize their political institutions and to provide for a sense of social and individual development and freedom. I think that Hegel's political philosophy in particular is an attempt to rework classical forms of republicanism in order to overcome its previous deficiencies. Hegel's ideas provide us with a deep structure for a modern form of republicanism that can offer a richer, more compelling conception of political life and human freedom than that of liberalism.

One of the core commitments of liberalism and its understanding of the rational society is the thesis that autonomous individuals can, through a process of reflective endorsement on abstract principles of fairness, maintain a society of tolerance and equality to opportunity that can allow each to fulfill his or her conceptions of the good life. The social ontology is atomistic, the epistemology is individualist, and the normative idea of the good is particularist. Hegel, by contrast, working in line with thinkers such as Rousseau, seeks a modern republican conception of political life by deepening the conception of the individual and maintaining the concept of a common good or public good that can secure a deeper, richer understanding of human freedom. I think this is the basic end sought by Hegel's political and moral philosophy and I will outline its main ideas and defend it as a post-liberal theory of politics in what follows.

For far too many, Hegel's ideas still hang between the poles of conservatism and radicalism. As a theorist of modernity, he has been particularly targeted as an apologist for the faults and excesses of rationalism and a bloated outdated metaphysics. I want to consider how Hegel's ideas can be seen to be essentially critical of our own age and the shapes of culture that pass for modern, or even postmodern. This essay will provide a description and defense of Hegel's unique conception of modernity – a conception of modernity yet to be realized. According to this view, the dialectic between the particular, individual and universal plays a unique role in the way that Hegel views the structure of modernity. His concepts of freedom, agency, sociality, institutions, the economy and state – all have at their basis the important pulse of the dialectic of this disjunctive syllogism. I will describe how this metaphysical interpretation differs, and is in many ways superior to, the dominant form of Hegel scholarship in the Anglo-American tradition which is based on the post-metaphysical and post-foundational turn and then go on to describe how Hegel's conception of modernity can be construed as a critical one, rather than an apology for its actually-existing forms.

This paper outlines Hegel's vision of what we can call a republican understanding of modernity. By this I mean that Hegel stands at the apex of a tradition of thought that saw the modern social world as defined by a kind of reason that allowed the individual to reach a higher conceptual grasp of himself and the social world. The nature of this rational understanding was the concept of human beings as interdependent members of a social totality that My thesis is that Hegel's ideas about politics and society are rooted in a republican structure of thought that is reworked by the modern ideas of highlighting the importance of the individual, of freedom and of universality. The republican structure of his thought consists in a concept of the common good of a society based on the essential social basis for human life and culture.

## II. An Inquiry into the Good

Since the central category of republicanism is the concept of the common good or common interest, it seems to me that this is the place to enter into the connection between Hegel's thought and his republicanism. In many ways, Hegel's social and political philosophy is centrally concerned with some of the most basic and traditional questions in political theory. What is the good, the basis of obligation, of the nature of justice and freedom? The predominant interpretation of Hegel's philosophy that predominates Anglophone scholarship maintains that Hegel's ideas are post-metaphysical and thoroughly post-foundational. They emphasize the need to see that the essential character of Hegel's ideas are only valid today insofar as we jettison its metaphysical baggage and the concepts of essence, ontology, and so on, that come with it. But to do this seems to me to gut Hegel's ideas of their more radical potential. What I want to suggest here is that the metaphysical infrastructure of Hegel's political philosophy provides us with access to richer ideas about the nature of freedom, individuality, autonomy and the good, rational society. What is needed here is to enquire into the ontological structure of human sociality and see this as an essential basis, or ground (*Boden*) for Hegel's political and ethical ideas. When we see this, Hegel becomes not a post-metaphysical thinker at all, but a metaphysical thinker who reflects on the real, rational ontology of human life as the foundation for a critical judgment capable of guiding our norms.

What can it mean for the common good, for a rational society, to be conceived as having a *rational structure*? This is an important concern and one that I will seek to defend in the remainder of this paper. In brief, I believe that Hegel's metaphysical categories laid out in his *Logic* can be seen as constitutive of a rational structure of social relations that also inform the rational will of free, self-determining individuals. What

the common good is, is not so much a particular set of values or norms, but rather that the norms, ends and institutions of the rational society be constituted by the kind of relational, interdependent structures of sociality that constitutes man's life. Unlike Aristotle who saw human sociality as natural and therefore as determinative from the outside of our reflection, Hegel's thesis is that a modern form of republicanism would be one where our sociality serves as the basis for the correct and rational concepts and norms that constitute our ethical life. Only when we have made the social world – the norms, institutions, habits and practices – in accordance with the needs and projects of the totality of the community, of which each as an individual is an integral and nonetheless self-differentiated member, can we understand what a free, common good could be like.<sup>1</sup>

This is to be contrasted with the defective forms of modernity that falsely claim to be able to represent the whole, but only in terms of its particular parts. Hence, capitalism, liberalism, and so on, are defective in that they project a totality through the fractured parts: self-interest, subjective desire, personal choice, etc. This is why Hegel believes that modern, free people are only satisfied when they are “at home” (*zu Hause*) in the social world they inhabit. This is not meant to convey that each of us must reconcile ourselves to the modern world *as it exists*, but rather to a world that we have generally made, that we have rationally constructed and that we can rationally endorse. This means that the concept of reason, of rationality, is the key concept that grants Hegel's ideas their power and depth. The key thesis here, as I see it, is that any rational comprehension of human life must grasp its social essence. Human life is essentially social, it consists of self- and other-relations that are dynamic, processual and reciprocally interdependent. Once we are able to grasp this, we are moving in a space of reasons that can grant each of us the appropriate rational content for an expanded conception of autonomy and sociality. Hegel's modern conception of republicanism therefore means that the concepts of the good, of freedom, of individuality, and so on, are all rooted in the ontology of social relations that constitute us and which we as members of that community also constitute in turn.

.....  
1 A.S. Walton notes that “it is only when we have appreciated that men are essentially social beings that we can properly understand the conditions under which they can coherently relate to one another in the community. It is therefore from the premise that men are social beings that the theoretical possibility of determining the common good, and, indeed, its desirability, is deduced.” Walton 1983, 760.

### III. The Metaphysics of Sociality

We can begin with this more controversial claim concerning the metaphysics of human sociality. Hegel's most basic claim, one that serves to frame his entire political philosophy, is that human beings are essentially social. They belong to a nexus of relations that have certain properties and which can be grasped through reason. Unlike many contemporary scholars who have recently defended the view of a “metaphysics without ontology,”<sup>2</sup> I contend that Hegel's views describe an *ontology of sociality*, or a rational, dialectical account of where what it means to live and to exist as free person means comprehending, at a conceptual level, that this means living, developing, existing within a structure of social relations that are not abstractions, but possess objective, ontological existence. Now, according to the prevailing view in much of contemporary Hegel scholarship, Hegel's metaphysical ideas are seen to be structures of thought, of thinking. As Robert Pippin notes, the essential project of Hegel's concept of modernity concerns “the very possibility of discursive intelligibility” by which he means that modernity is characterized by processes of reason-exchange that can justify and endorse certain forms of life. These kinds of life are characterized by our recognition of others as having statuses that allow each to be free. As Pippin notes: “being a free agent – an actual or successful agent – is said to depend on being recognized as one by others whose recognition itself depends in turn on their being recognized as such free recognizers.”<sup>3</sup>

But the view I privilege sees Hegel's logical categories of constitutive not only of thought itself, but of a rational structure of the world itself. This structure goes much deeper than the recognition of others and their statuses; it must also grasp the totality of our social relations and interdependencies as an ontological structure that has constitutive powers over our lives.<sup>4</sup> When individuals possess rational comprehension of their social world, they will also be able to think in universal terms, i.e., in terms of the social-ontological structures that constitute the essence of human life. Hegel's logical ideas developed in his metaphysics are therefore the crucial undergirding structure of his political philosophy. Hegel sees that the structure of spirit is rational only when it is able to reflect into itself the truth of its object. As Willem deVries argues, “Hegel is quite convinced that any ‘knowledge’ that is not of the object as it is in itself is not *knowledge* at all. Hegelian concepts, like those of the great classical thinkers, must be objective, humanly

.....  
2 See Pippin 2000 as well as Bowman 2015.

3 Pippin 2008, 214.

4 For important discussions of unique category of sociality, see Israel 1977 and Brown 2014.

graspable features of things as they are in themselves.”<sup>5</sup> In this case, the object is social life itself. In this sense, when we talk about rational forms of agency and subjectivity, we must be referring to the object of sociality in its entirety and complexity and linking this to the concepts of the good, freedom and the will. This will constitute a basic theory of a modern form of republicanism that Hegel believes will serve as the context for modern freedom.

We can begin to understand this thesis by turning to Hegel’s theory of “recognition” (*Anerkennung*) which I think can be seen as a phenomenological opening to how modern subjects can come to self-conscious of the deeper structures of their subjectivity through their awareness of others, an awareness not only of the concrete other, but ultimately of the community as a whole and the self’s integral partnership with it. The thesis about recognition therefore asks us to consider the post-liberal concept of the self, of the human individual, as a self-aware, self-conceiving individual who is aware and acts upon his interdependent status with others. One is a social being, but not in the classical Greek or Roman expression of the term since it is our rational self-consciousness of this sociality that is key to our freedom. What the rational subject realizes through the process of recognition is that the ego’s relation to the world can no longer be conceived in mere subject-object terms, in a Kantian-Copernican sense, but instead as an intersubjective and independent structure of reality. As recent accounts of Hegel’s theory of recognition point out, there is a four stage process at work here: that of autonomy, union, self-overcoming and release. Autonomy is seen by Hegel not in atomist terms, but in dialectical relation with the unity of the self with others, leading to a self-overcoming where the individual’s solipsism is broken down and replaced with a more enriched understanding of the self as mediated-by-others. Finally, the other is seen as different, but nevertheless as also constituted by shared relations. This stage of release (*Freigabe*) allows the self to achieve a synthesis of particularity and individuality via universality, thereby allowing for an expansion and deepening of our subjectivity that will be able to move in a space of reasons that grasps essential sociality of our lives. We begin to grasp the ontological reality of the social totality. As Robert Williams explains: “*Freigabe* makes it clear that the ‘We’ Hegel is after is a community of freedom that does not absorb or reduce individuals in their differences. . . . Union with the other is also an expression of difference. Only such reciprocal release makes the ‘We’ a

.....  
5 deVries 1993, 226-227; also see Houlgate 2008.

concrete universal rather than an abstract identity.”<sup>6</sup>

What this means is that each comes to realize rationally not only that the other exists, and that the other comes to count, although this is true. On a deeper level, each ego comes realize that the world he inhabits is really constituted by a structure of relations and that these relations not only emanate from me, but in fact constitute a dynamic structure of reciprocity.<sup>7</sup> This is an important point since, as Hegel makes clear in his *Science of Logic*, the concept, or the rationality of the world, is brought forth through the process of reciprocal interaction (*Wechselwirkung*) and not simply something that is statically cognizable. Reciprocal interaction between cause and effect, subject and object, and so on, means “the unity of the two substances in reciprocity, but in such a way that they now belong to freedom, for the identity they have is no longer blind or inner (*Innerliches*), and their essential determination is that they are show (*Schein*) or moments of reflection where each has immediately coincided with its other or its positedness, and each contains its positedness in itself and thus is simply posited as self-identical in its other.”<sup>8</sup> What this means is that the concept is an expression of freedom in the sense that each moment of the concept taken out of its mechanistic role of relating to another as a separate, and determined aspect of the totality, and now achieves a self-determined role as a constitutive part of a systemic structure of reciprocal relations.

Although this is abstract, we can see the parallel between Hegel’s metaphysical thesis about the nature of the relational structure of the concept (i.e., of rationality and freedom) on the one hand, and the way this instantiates itself in spirit, in the actual social interaction of human beings. Our sociality can therefore be seen as the substance that can only achieve conceptual – i.e., rational, free form – once it is grasped as a systemic process of reciprocal interactions. If the process of recognition is allowed to play itself out, it leads us, he seems to be saying, to a situation wherein each of us conceives of ourselves as belonging to this social-ontological structure of relations; that we realize that they mediate, shape and can be shaped by us. Indeed, these relations, once they are grasped as having *ontological*, rather than merely *natural* or *abstract*, status are the very substance of what it means to be a rational,

.....  
6 Williams 2003, 69; also cf. Siep 1978.

7 Stanley Rosen comments on this point that: “Hegel’s meaning, which does not become clear until after we know the logic, is that I can recognize myself in the other because we are both instances of the self-consciousness of Absolute Spirit. The structure of my relations to the other is the externalized version of my ‘relations’ to myself. And these interior ‘relations’ are the expressions of the Absolute.” Rosen 1974, 159.

8 Hegel 1969, 251.

self-determining, and hence *free* being. The freedom consists of the fact that the universal is now seen not as a homogenizing force, but as encompassing the differences of its components while still preserving those differences. The universal concept integrates these differences and relates it its other as it relates to itself. As Hegel notes in the *Science of Logic*: “The universal is therefore free power; it is itself and it grabs after (*greift über*) its other, but not by force, but is peaceful and at home (*bei sich selbst*).”<sup>9</sup> Hence, we begin to see the deeper metaphysical structure of the social dimensions of human freedom as the self-conscious grasping of our sociality and as the constitutive structure of processual relations that shape the world within which we, as individuals, move and operate.

We can therefore think of his discussion of the problems inherent in “civil society” (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) as associated with the condition of not achieving this higher, conceptual grasp of the ontology of our social relations. In a sense, this is a defective form of modernity insofar as the members of this social condition lack the sufficient cognitive grasp of the ontology of social relations necessary to grant them the conceptual (i.e., free) clarity needed to live in a rational community as rational selves. In civil society, dominated as it is by markets, egoism, and particularity, each particular member of the community work for their own ends and desires, and they are unaware – as was pointed out by Adam Smith and other Scottish political economists – that there is a larger, common end that they work toward. But Hegel seems to have rejected the idea that this was true, that what was needed for a genuinely modern and rational society was that each would be able to pursue one’s particular interests, but self-consciously within the framework of social relations that constituted one’s ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*); that the crucial concern is the passage from particularity to individuality as the crucial turn for a rational and free political community. It is therefore only once we have achieved the rational re-construction or re-cognition (literally, an *An-erkennung*) of our reality through integrating the structure of our other- and self-relations into conceptual thought that we will, be able to render self-conscious our reality as socially constituted selves.<sup>10</sup>

The problem with civil society is that the process of recognition is stopped from revealing the deeper, conceptual richness of the structure of our relations with one another. They remain formal and are halted from

.....  
9 Hegel 1969, 277.

10 Jean Hyppolite rightly argues here with respect to the structure of the *Logik*, that “c’est la catégorie du sens qui devient la vérité des catégories de l’être et de l’essence.” Hyppolite 1953, 222.

revealing the ontology of our relations.<sup>11</sup> It is only when the ego comes to see himself as a “We” via the process of recognition, that a totality of social relations and others constitute his world. His solipsism is not only exploded, but the concept of the good, of his interests, of happiness and so on will all come to be enlarged in scope as well. The totality of these relations constitute not an oppressive external scheme for him, but rather the very truth of his own being and his potentiality.<sup>12</sup> He achieves the status of an ethical being insofar as he takes into himself the other and the structure of relations that bind each to the other. He begins to grasp the ontological status of the relations that govern his sociality and his own agency. Only equipped with this self-consciousness can he begin to enter a wider space of reasons and to see the dynamic relations of sociality as the context for a rational, modern expression of spirit (*Geist*).

But where this leads us on a political level is altogether a new matter. What I think Hegel is asking us to consider is the extent to which we can grasp through reason the reality of a common good – of a kind of good to which our common goals and purposes can be judged against. The basic idea here is that the ontological reality of the social-relational and interdependent qualities of human social life can be a kind of substance that is shaped and ordered in different ways. The key Hegelian project must be to find a desideratum for what shapes of sociality promote the common good of its members best; which institutions, norms, practices and so on will best enhance and keep in view the ontology of social relations and shape them most rationally. Clearly, there will never be a single formula, it will consist in an open-ended and even experimental process. But there will be little doubt that this structure of social relations is the very substance of what a free life will consist. This will be the most rational form of social arrangements and it will take not a liberal cast, but a modern republican one insofar as we take the view that concept (*Begriff*) is able to organize our reflective capacities around the concrete universality of the structure of social relations. This means that the triadic feature of the concept – of universal, particular and individual – is also the immanent rational structure of our social reality itself. A modern, rational culture would therefore be one that realizes the

.....  
11 David Kolb maintains on this point that: “In civil society, structures of mutual recognition are not done away with, but they become formal. . . . The self-sufficiency characteristic of the members of civil society is a first attempt to have the freedom of true individuals but an attempt still too much caught up in being different from the whole. Its ‘freedom from’ is too much defined in terms of opposition to be able to reach the self-completeness and independence characteristic of true individuality.” Kolb 1986, 68, 71.

12 Herbert Marcuse notes here that: “The locus of truth is not the proposition, but the dynamic system of speculative judgments in which every single judgment must be ‘sublated’ by another, so that only the whole process represents the truth.” Marcuse 1954, 102.

concept, that realizes the actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) of a free, rational society through anchoring its practical reason in the cognitive grasp of the ontological structure of social relations as the totality, the Absolute Idea, of our human reality. This therefore becomes an insurgent Idea (*Idee*) that can be used to judge and interrogate the existing social structures and institutions that pervade our world. The metaphysical structure of Hegel's political ideas provide us with a powerful tool for critical rationality.

#### IV. Rational and Irrational Wills

One of the core ideas that we get from reading the *Philosophy of Right* is that modernity insists upon a specific kind of agency, a particular kind of subjectivity. What I explored in the above section was a thesis about what I see to be a consequence of reading the metaphysical layer of Hegel's theory about recognition and sociality. But Hegel is an objective Idealist, he may see that the true, objective and ontological reality of human life is social and that this sociality points toward freedom only when its various members come to self-consciousness as members of this ontological structure of relations. But the key here is that, as for any Idealist, the emphasis is placed on the individual and his ability to achieve and maintain that cognitive level of awareness of the conceptual truth of the totality. What Hegel is after in his discussion of the rational as opposed to irrational will, of the *Wille* as opposed to the *Willkür*, is the idea that only an expanded form of subjectivity will be up to the task of achieving and maintaining a modern, rational form of freedom.

This idea goes back to Rousseau and his idea of the "general will." For Rousseau, the general will was to be seen as a particular kind of cognition that governed the agent's reflection on civic affairs as well as constituted through his thoughts, practices, norms and actions a specific kind of community: a republic. Rousseau was essentially pursuing what we can call an expanded notion of subjectivity: a form of cognition that each would possess where they were aware of the general needs of the community as well as the individual and that a violation of one was a violation of the other.<sup>13</sup> What Rousseau was after was a conception of the self, a conception of individuality that was able to hold in view the general welfare of the community but also see simultaneously that his own individual welfare was integral to that common good and vice versa. It was the common advantage that created the context for any kind of good individuality to emerge. But Rousseau was not interested in having the general welfare, the *res publica*, overcome and dominate the individual. Rather, the proper, modern expression of civic freedom

.....  
13 See Thompson 2017.

would be one where individuals rationally were aware of themselves as interdependent beings; aware of themselves, through reflection, that this common structure of the good community and the common goods needed to maintain and enhance it, were placed at the center of the rational self's reflective reasoning.

Hegel was working in the same structure of thought as Rousseau on this question.<sup>14</sup> He saw the limits of liberalism and its particularism as expressions of a degenerated form of individuality and community. Most important was the fact that civil society, when left to itself, would fail to achieve the true freedom of the community and its members. Only when the process of recognition was able to reveal for each member of the society the ontological structure of their social-relational interdependence would one begin to achieve the status of individuality that Hegel explores in his *Science of Logic*. Hence, Hegel writes that: "the mutually related self-conscious subjects, by setting aside their unequal particularity, have risen to the consciousness of their real universality, of the freedom belonging to all, and hence to the intuition of their specific identity with each other."<sup>15</sup> What is happening in this process of recognition is that it serves as a kind of phenomenological membrane through which we pass into the cognitive grasp of the ontological structure of human sociality. Our ideas about the nature of human life are now shaped by the true structure of that reality which we were able to put together through the struggle for recognition. What this new achieved status of individuality comes to grasp is not that he is negated by the social whole, but rather that, *qua* individual, he is an integral part of a sociality that shapes him as well as which he helps to shape and constitute. Indeed, Hegel's holism must be contrasted to any sense of monism where the various parts of the totality are mere accidents of that totality. As Robert Stern correctly points out: "holism stresses the dependence of finite things on another, in its *modest* form it can still respect the individuality of finite things in so far as parts can be individuals, to the extent of having identity conditions that make it intelligible to treat a part as the *same*, and so as persisting over time."<sup>16</sup>

.....  
14 A distinctive difference is the way that Hegel conceives of the will, not as a general will, per se, but as he says, the free will wills the concept of the will. As Paul Franco correctly notes: "In opposition to Rousseau, Hegel interprets the universal will in terms of the rational will. Unlike the individual will, the rational will does not derive its content from something other than itself – from our inclinations, fancies, or desires. Rather, the rational will derives its content from the concept of the will, freedom, itself. The rational will is simply the will that wills freedom – in the form of objective rights and institutions developed over the course of the *Philosophy of Right* – and hence wills itself." Franco 1999, 289.

15 Hegel 1970 §436z.

16 Stern 2009, 64.

So what we come to recognize as rational agents through the process of recognition is not an oppressive communitarian scheme, but a more ontologically rich structure of interdependencies that are constitutive of myself and my social reality. The cognitive processes that are embedded in modern forms of life – of marriage, exchange economy, the state, and so on – all contain processes of recognition pushing the ego out of a solipsism that opposes it to an alter or set of alters and into a “we-consciousness” where ego absorbs the alter into his own self-conception. Only when this is achieved can the individual begin to emerge by which is meant the I’s capacity to think in universal terms, i.e., as what he actually is: a social being with the capacity to reason and cognize as a member of that totality.<sup>17</sup> The key seems to me here that Hegel would say to us that proper concepts about our political life must be made from within a space of reasons that is populated by true concepts about who we are; that the norms we seek to create, to be worthy of our endorsement, be those that reflect and be constitutive of our sociality and the kinds of selves that will be shaped by the forms of sociality that our community manifests.

We can judge our social arrangements, on this view, as either enhancing our individuality, as fulfilling the ontological potentialities of our sociality or as diminishing them and making them defective, as the different explorations in the *Phenomenology* make evident. Even more, in his own political reflections, Hegel was consistent in his condemnation of those social forms that did not enhance the common welfare of all seeing the economic system of England, for instance, as being particularly defective in its capacity to realize freedom and a humane existence. Capitalist society, to take a contemporary example, would be condemned to the extent that the institution and practices of capital do violence to our social relations and also fail to produce rational individuals capable of universal forms of reflective endorsement.<sup>18</sup>

What this means is that Hegel’s concept of the social whole, of the universal, is nothing akin to the oppressive form of social whole seen in the Greek *polis*, for instance, nor the problems inherent in communitarian schemes. He is emphatic that the individual is not the narrow particularity of liberalism, but rather a self-conscious members of a totality of dynamic, interdependent structures of relations. We

.....  
17 See the discussion also by Michael Quante who argues that: “Innerhalb dieser Perspektive darf man den Willen nicht als eine individuelle Entität auffassen, sondern muss ihn als ein Universale mit philosophisch angegebener Bestimmung verstehen. Dieses Universale, in Hegels Terminologie das Allgemeine, individuiert sich selbst aufgrund eines logischen Selbstbestimmungsprozesses.” Quante 2011, 160.

18 See Thompson 2015.

come to grasp this ontology of our sociality through recognition and recognize our self- and other-conceptions about the world as a result. This is why, in the *Philosophy of Right* there is a transition from the sphere of “morality” (*Moralität*) to that of “ethical life” (*Sittlichkeit*). To possess the *Wille*, the rational will, is to be informed by this universality; to achieve true individuality and have one’s thoughts, actions, practices and so on imbued by universality. And not in a formal sense, as in civil society, but in the content of one’s beliefs and actions. Freedom is therefore not an abstraction, something left to the whim of each particular member of society. Rather, it is something that must be manifest in the world, it must become *Recht*, objectified in our institutions, practices and norms, not simply remain abstract *principle*. As Stephen Houlgate notes: “The ethical will is theoretical in that, like the moral will, it knows freedom to be universal, to be the freedom of all free individuals, but, unlike the moral will, it understands freedom in the form of right and welfare to be actually present and realized in the world.”<sup>19</sup>

This is a very different kind of agent than that proposed by modern liberalism. Indeed, through the processes of individualization shaped and structured by the institutional forms of “ethical life,” modern individuality should be seen as an achieved status where the ego – transformed into a we-thinking self by the process of recognition – has as the basis of his will the concept of sociality that make up the groundwork for the universal grasp of the social world. What Hegel is after is a kind of individuality that possesses universality as an integral part of his self.<sup>20</sup> It is an expanded understanding of subjectivity that has at its core, its basis the concept of spirit itself.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, it is the sociality of our reason, but also the ontological structures of social relations that serve as the ground of our individuality and the will that corresponds to this kind of reflection is a rational will, the *Wille* as opposed to a will that simply does what it pleases arbitrarily according to its own particularity (*Willkür*). This is why he maintains that the final stage of ethical life, the state, must be seen in terms that are embedded within the expanded sphere of individuality which, as we have seen, has spirit as its ground. To have spirit as its ground means that the rational subject thinks with concepts that are

.....  
19 Houlgate 1995, 875.

20 Michael Quante correctly points out that “Hegel versteht dabei Subjektivität generell als Individualisierung und Verwirklichung eines Allgemeinen in einem Einzelnen.” Quante 2011, 164.

21 Joshua D. Goldstein insightfully remarks that “when spirit becomes the will’s foundation, the concept of individuality expands, bursting through the distinctions between an interior, true self and an exterior world of objects and forces. We are required to rethink the nature of the self and its willful activity once neither can be contained in a single unit.” Goldstein 2006, 131. Also see the important discussion by Yeomans 2012.

logically consistent with the ontological features of his sociality; it means that he as an individual, realizes himself as no longer being a solipsistic particular, but rather a constitutive and constituted member of a social totality.

The essential idea here is that the state is only modern, only truly an objectification of human freedom, when it is able to serve as a higher form of sociality, as allowing the rational individual to be informed by the universal and for the rational self to have universality guide his reasons, norms and practices. As Hegel says in detail in the *Philosophy of Right*:

The state is the actuality of concrete freedom. But concrete freedom requires that personal individuality and its particular interests should reach their full *development* and gain *recognition* of their right for itself (within the system of the family and of civil society), and also that they should, on the one hand, *pass over* of their own accord into the interest of the universal, and on the other, knowingly and willingly acknowledge this universal interest even as their own *substantial spirit*, and actively pursue it as their ultimate end. . . . The principle of modern states has this tremendous power and depth because the principle of subjectivity itself is permitted to develop to its self-determined extreme of personal particularity while at the same time it is brought back to a substantial unity and so maintains this unity in the principle of subjectivity.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly what Hegel is after here is the complex but essential point about the relation between the modern individual and the rational community and its institutions. The purpose of the modern political community is one that is able to unite the rational individual and the rational community. The rational individual is one who knows that his freedom is functionally dependent on the ontology of social relations that constitute him and the rational community will be that very shape of social relations that constitutes the field for his freedom and self-determination not to mention his self-realization, as well. Since this individual knows that he is part of this structure of relations, and that his own good is a function of it, the rational will wills only what is good for his welfare which is also the welfare of others.<sup>23</sup> We have broken through the

.....  
22 Hegel 1971, §260.

23 Eugène Fleischmann insightfully remarks on this point that: “*Réaliser* la subjectivité, cela veut

liberal dividing lines of civil society and state, private and public and now see that each is constitutive of the other. Rationality keeps in view the concrete universal, without which there can be no freedom because no true individuality exists.<sup>24</sup>

So now we can see that the ontology of sociality that I posited as the metaphysical foundation for Hegel's political philosophy is also essential to grasp how his conception of individuality, the will, self-determination and freedom work together. Hegel is clearly saying that the concept of the good can no longer be an issue for the particular person alone; nor can it be something that finds itself expressed in formal and abstract principles. Rather, the good now is seen to be, as he puts it, “The Idea as the unity of the concept of the will with the particular will. . . . The good is thus freedom realized, the absolute end and aim of the world.”<sup>25</sup> This is also the passage of the particular into the realm of the individual: for now the particular self begins to grasp that the good is only possible by keeping in view the welfare of all and not only in a formal sense, but in a concrete, *actual (Wirklich)* sense. It means that each individual is truly free once he inhabits a world of others, relations, practices, norms and institutions that make real in the world the common good of its members, when each of these members has in view this common good, and where each is able cognize oneself and others as being ensconced in a structure of relations that can be shaped and oriented toward the fulfillment and good of its members. As Richard Bellamy rightly points out: “our projects only gain meaning and purpose, become expressions of our individuality and autonomy, within the context of a shared set of norms. These norms make social life possible, since they enable us to relate our own interests with those of others as part of the complex tapestry of universal values which make for a worthwhile life.”<sup>26</sup> Hegel's political philosophy is, in the final analysis, a groundwork for a modern republicanism.

---

donc dire créer une réalité commune, obligatoire, valable pour tous les sujets libres, un *système* des devoirs et obligations selon les règles de la liberté et de la raison. La notion la plus universelle et la plus concrète de l'*objectivité libre* sera donc l'État où *toutes* les exigences de la liberté peuvent être posées et satisfaites, où la raison est à la fois le sujet et l'objet (celui qui exige et ce qui est exigé), où l'universalité se réalise pleinement, c'est-à-dire aussi bien par la satisfaction de la conscience individuelle subjective que par l'érection d'un système objectif et universel des lois.” Fleischmann 1964, 180.

24 As Dieter Henrich rightly notes: “it is clear that the substance of the state is the actuality of free persons who not only recognize the state, but also bring it into being through their own activity – not in the reflected distance of some purely external ‘production’ but in the entire self-consciousness of their own free activity.” Henrich 2004, 263.

25 Hegel 1971, §129.

26 Bellamy 1987, 701.

## V. The Republican Structure of Hegel's Political Thought

We can now begin to square the ideas I have been exploring above with my thesis that Hegel's republicanism is a distinctly modern form of republicanism and to consider my next proposition: namely that Hegel's republicanism possesses radical implications for our understanding of modern society. There are several aspects to the political theory of republicanism that Hegel instantiates. One of them is the connection between the individual and society. Republican thinkers in the classical period saw human beings as naturally social or naturally political. They saw the city as the natural context for the perfective development of the human being. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and a host of other classical writers all shared the view that the social nature of human beings led to the argument that the common good of all members of the society was the highest political and ethical ideal. The shared life of its members was, for them, more important than the individual members themselves taken on their own. They opted for a communitarian view of the good and saw it as a natural feature of human life.

I have shown that Hegel's republicanism is also concerned with the good, the common good, of its members. This common good is not grounded in our nature, as it was for classical authors, but does take as its ground (*Boden*), as I have sought to show here, the ontological structure of social relations as constituting the dynamic and developmental context for the actuality of human freedom. The republican idea still structures Hegel's concept of what it means to be a free being, to be a part of a totality and yet maintain the modern achievements of autonomy. Since he is wedded to the principle of subjectivity, there cannot be a conception of the common good that excludes the principle of individuality. As Andrew Buchwalter has rightly claimed, "for Hegel, political sentiment does express an organic and even an immediate relationship between individual and community. Though cultivated rather than instinctive, that relationship must still be regarded as a 'second nature.'"<sup>27</sup> But even though this is the case, it is essential to point out that a common good is still the aim of the free state. The common good is based on the premise that human beings are essentially social, that they are who they are because of the ontology of social relations that shape their inner and outer world.

If we look at the matter in this way, Hegel's republican modernity emphasizes the need for a new, expanded form of subjectivity that will be able of thinking the universal, of grasping that the common welfare of all is rooted in the concepts and norms that I follow. Even though each is

.....  
<sup>27</sup> Buchwalter 1993, 5.

free in his or her subjectivity, this can only be truly free as long as I relate to others and myself as taking part in the collective ends and purposes of the association of all. This entails a very different understanding of modernity from that expressed by liberal theory. Hegel's idea about modernity is one where common ends and purposes are pursued freely by individual agents through their own rational understanding of their sociality. Since their own lives and the products of their culture are known to possess a social basis, that our relations with others are not simply created by contract or arbitrarily chosen by us, but are rather ontological facets of human life, Hegel's modern free community would not allow its members to make the institutions of the society into vehicles for their particular interests.

Hegel retains his radicalism once we are able to keep in view the idea that his political ideas rest on a kind of rationality that explodes all forms of particularism and fragmentation. The deep-seated theme of republicanism, of the quest for a kind of political society that is rooted in the twin values of common, universal goods and the autonomous freedom of the individual, remains a political and cultural project yet to be realized. And if we push the matter, we should say that Hegel's political philosophy describes for us the concept of a post-liberal idea of society. It would not allow it to create technological and economic ends that would alienate and oppress the members of the community. The social world would be a very different one from what we see around us today. Perhaps this, in the end, is what makes Hegel's ideas so persistently salient in our own time and also so potentially radical as well. What he offers us is a more rational view of what modernity could look like. What a more humane, rational and free community would look like. In this sense, we can see that the promise of modernity must take a post-liberal path if his ideas are to have meaning in our age.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bellamy, Richard 1987 "Hegel and Liberalism." *History of European Ideas*, 8(6): 693-708.
- Bowman, Brady 2015 *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, Michael E. 2014 *The Concept of the Social in Uniting the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Buchwalter, Andrew 1993 "Hegel, Modernity and Civic Republicanism." *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 7(1): 1-12.
- deVries, Willem 1993 "Hegel's Logic and Philosophy of Mind." In R.C. Solomon and K.M. Higgins (eds.) *The Routledge History of Philosophy*, vol. VI. New York: Routledge: 216-253.
- Fleischmann, Eugène 1964 *La philosophie politique de Hegel*. Paris: Plon.
- Franco, Paul 1999 *Hegel's Philosophy of Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Goldstein, Joshua D. 2006 *Hegel's Idea of the Good Life*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Hegel, G.W.F. 1969 *Wissenschaft der Logik*, vol. 2. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Hegel, G.W.F. 1970 *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, vol. 3. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Hegel, G.W.F. 1971 *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*. Stuttgart: Reclam.
- Henrich, Dieter 2004 "Logical Form and Real Totality: The Authentic Conceptual Form of Hegel's Concept of the State." In Robert Pippin and Otfried Höffe (eds.) *Hegel on Ethics and Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press: 241-267.
- Houlgate, Stephen 1995 "The Unity of Theoretical and Practical Spirit in Hegel's Concept of Freedom." *The Review of Metaphysics* 48(4): 859-881.
- Houlgate, Stephen 2008 "Hegel's Logic." In Frederick Beiser (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press: 111-134.
- Hyppolite, Jean 1953 *Logique et existence: Essai sur la logique de Hegel*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Israel, Joachim 1977 *Die sozialen Beziehungen: Grundelemente der Sozialwissenschaft*. Hamburg: Rowolt.
- Kolb, David 1986 *The Critique of Pure Modernity: Hegel, Heidegger, and After*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Marcuse, Herbert 1954 *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Pippin, Robert 2000 "What Is the Question for which Hegel's Theory of Recognition Is the Answer?" *European Journal of Philosophy*, 8(2): 155-172.
- Pippin, Robert 2008 *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Quante, Michael 2011 *Die Wirklichkeit des Geistes: Studien zu Hegel*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Rosen, Stanley 1974 *G.W.F. Hegel: An Introduction to the Science of Wisdom*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Siep, Ludwig 1978 *Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktische Philosophie*. Freiburg: Karl Alber.
- Stern, Robert 2009 *Hegelian Metaphysics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, Michael J. 2015 "Capitalism as Deficient Modernity: Hegel against the Modern Economy." In Andrew Buchwalter (ed.) *Hegel and Capitalism*, Albany: SUNY Press: 117-132.
- Thompson, Michael J. 2017 "Autonomy and Common Good: Interpreting Rousseau's General Will." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* (in press)
- Walton, A. S. 1983 "Hegel, Utilitarianism and the Common Good." *Ethics*, 93(4): 753-771.
- Williams, Robert R. 2003 "The Concept of Recognition in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*." In Alfred Denker and Michael Vater (eds.) *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: New Critical Essays*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 59-92.
- Yeomans, Christopher 2012 *Freedom and Reflection: Hegel and the Logic of Agency*. New York: Oxford University Press.

C  
R  
I  
S  
I  
S  
&  
C  
R  
I  
T  
I  
Q  
U  
E

/

Volume 4 /  
Issue 1