

Hegel on Social Pathology: The Actuality of Unreason

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Abstract: In a famous passage in his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel claimed that “philosophy is its own time comprehended in thought.” But our time is very different from Hegel’s, so two approaches have developed to the possible relevance of his work for the contemporary world. One looks to remaining points of contact, such as his criticism of a contractualist views of the state. Another tries to apply his general approach to contemporary issues, especially those formulated in terms he would not use. Both are valuable, but in this article the latter is taken up, and one issue is the focus. The question is: assuming there can be collective intentionality and collective agency (what Hegel calls *Geist*), how should we understand Hegel’s claim that such group agents can be collectively self-deceived? And: how would that claim bear on the contemporary political world?

Keywords: agency, intentionality, self-deceit, spirit, *Geist*, *akrasia*, unreason, irrational, pathology

Hegel is well known for having claimed that philosophy is “it’s own time comprehended in thought” The implications of this claim are immediately apparent in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, that follows this claim in its Preface. That is, Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* is not a treatment of the institutions Hegel thinks constitutive of justice for anyone, anywhere, at any time. It is clearly an analysis of the modern understanding and realization of contract, crime, legal and moral responsibility, moral conscience, the modern, nuclear family, a market economy and modern political institutions. But it is also clearly neither an empirical social analysis of how such a society actually works, nor a pure normative assessment of these distinctive characteristics, measured against some trans-historical ideal.

This immediately raises the question of just how “time-bound” Hegel’s account of Right actually is, and, therewith, how we should understand the bearing of his account on our own time, a very different time of mass consumer societies, a globalized economy, very different marriage and divorce conventions, a highly commercialized and manipulable public sphere and so forth. Some have argued that, even so, there are enough points of determinate contact that some direct relevance is still possible. Some commentators refer to Hegel’s account of the limitations of contractarian models of the state or of the limitations of liberal notions of rights protection, or his reasons for insisting on a

state/civil society distinction. I will follow here another line of thought, highlighting instead the fruitfulness of his approach in general, and one unusual aspect of that approach, announced in my title.

But both aspects of his original and influential claim that philosophy has a historical-diagnostic task have proven difficult to understand. By the two aspects, I mean, first, exactly what is to be understood by the philosopher's "time," and, second, what does "comprehended in thought" amount to? Time is short, so I will simply make a suggestion about each. There would seem to be a simple, clear answer to the former question. The covering name for the historical institutions and practices that attract Hegel's philosophical attention to a time is "Geist," now commonly translated as "spirit," although that term in English has a faint "spiritualistic" tone. Geist can be manifest in subjective, objective or absolute form, whether as the subject of a unique kind of analysis, a phenomenology, whether understood as a "world spirit," (Weltgeist) or a "folk spirit" (Volkgeist). In other words, Geist, like being for Aristotle, is said in many ways, and is even what the Aristotelians call a "pros hen equivocal," a kind of cluster of converging meanings, rather than a term definable all at once. It figures in his account of individual mindedness, world history, and religion, all in differently inflected ways. For our purposes, we can concentrate on what he calls "objektive Geist." In that context, Geist refers to a collective mindedness, the forms of which collectivity (the "Gestalten des Geistes") change over historical time. In general we can consider Geist a form of collective intentionality: shared beliefs, attitudes, dispositions that the sharing members know are shared. This can be misleading because Hegel means his collective mindedness to refer to a basic level of such shared intentionality, that on which all contingent forms of collectivity must be consistent with. That is, Geist, as used by Hegel, is not meant to be manifest in every instance of collective like-mindedness, as evident in every institution. He means the term to refer to the mindedness he thinks is evident in Greek tragedies and religious practices (wherever commitments to issues of the utmost human significance are manifest), but not in bowling leagues, or condo associations. But the important point in this limited context is that anything that is to count as a common mindedness, including any concrete shape of Geist, is never treated by Hegel as some summary compilation of individually held attitudes, majoritarian views, or even as the direct object of intentional attitudes like beliefs. However, while there are similarities, Geist does not function in Hegel as something like a presupposed "form of life," as it might be found in Wittgenstein, or as "Welt" might function in the early Heidegger. This is because Hegel clearly thinks it is possible to ascribe states

and capacities to such a collective subject in a sense identical in many (though not all) senses to the way we ascribe such states and capacities to individual persons. This goes well beyond the ascription of common, deeply presupposed commitments and assumptions and dispositions. We can even say that a historical form of Geist can be reflective about itself and its commitments, can come over time to greater and greater self-consciousness (for example, in and by means of its art works), and that it can be said to do things, for which responsibility can be ascribed. (This last is especially true of states that act in our name as citizens.) We can (once we account for the unique standing of governments, that they possess authority, not brute power, a normative status that requires that those who do what governments tell them to do, believe it is right to do so, even if against self-interest) thus speak of a group agent. But this would be just an example. Governments, for Hegel, are not primary manifestations of the group-agent, Geist, but depend for their sense of a deeper and much, much broader form of collectivity. The deepest level of such shared historical collectivity or objective Geist is manifest in objective practices and institutions; that is, Abstract Right, Morality, and Ethical Life (or the Family Civil Society, and the State.

Such a postulation of a common mindedness is not a fiction, or a mere heuristic or theoretical posit. It has ontological status; there are such entities, in the sense in which we say that there are economies or religions. Now of course, Geist cannot be said to behave in all ways like an individual subject or agent. It is not embodied in the same way, can be said to "have emotions" only in a highly metaphorical way (as in a collective hysteria or panic, or in moments like the French Terror, or post 9/11 America). It has a past it carries forward and appeals to, but Geist does not remember its past as an individual does, and so on. Nevertheless, Hegel is willing to go very far in what he wants to claim about such a collective subject, as we shall see.

Finally, when Hegel describes Geist as an "I that is a We," and a "We that is an I," he is committing himself to a dialectical relation between any such collective or group subject and the individual persons who are its participants. It is possible to misread this passage as saying something like "all that it is to be an individual I is to be part of a We, and this We is what any individual I really is." But that would have the passage just say the same thing twice. He clearly means that while any individual I comes to be the I it is and maintains its sense of itself as such an individual within a common mindedness, it is also the case that this common mindedness is only possible by the attitudes and commitments of distinct, individual "I's." That is, such a collectivity is not possible except as constituted in some way by the attitudes and commitments

of these participants. It would not exist were there not these attitudes and commitments. This does not reduce in any way the reality of Geist as Geist; such attitudes and commitments do achieve the status of collective agency. But the direction of dependence famously goes both ways for him. Individuals should not be understood as, ex ante, atomistic, self-sufficient origins of such commitments, as if Geist comes into being only as a result of constituting acts by atomic individuals. They are the individuals they are only as already “formed” or gebildet within, and as inheriting, such collectivities. (So, Hegel will insist: “to take conscious individuality so mindlessly as an individual existing phenomenon is contradictory since the essence of individuality is the universal of spirit.”¹ This is expressed in full Hegelese, but in itself this is a very old idea, apparent in the philosopher equally as influential on Hegel as Kant; that is, in Aristotle’s insistence that, considered outside the polis, a human being is not comprehensible as a human being. He is either a beast or a god. But Hegel’s bi-directionality and historicity greatly complicates such a picture. This co-constituting mutual dependence is why Hegel can frequently say something that would otherwise be quite mysterious, that spirit is “a product of itself.”² (Geist is this co-constituting relation; the product of individuals who are themselves the products of their participation in Geist. Geist has no substantial existence apart from this mutual reflection.)

These are still fairly vague terms, and can be easily misunderstood. It is important to stress again that Hegel’s account of Geist is not an instance of any substance metaphysics. Group agents are not things. While it is true that Hegel readily admits that there is no such collective agency without the attitudes, intentions, and commitments of the participating individuals, his case for the “other side” of the dialectic hangs on the notion of a dependence, on various forms of dependence between such individuals and “the Geist” of which they are a part. This dependence is both historical – the individually held attitudes and commitments cannot be wholly self-generated by individual reflection, but in large part descend from an inherited, common store, often so deeply presupposed as to be unnoticeable as such – and formative. The model of a group agent’s reflection would be simplistic in the extreme if we thought of individual participation as something like bloc voting by monadic individuals. Participation in the group – debate, persuasion, the revelation of new possibilities – and a dependence on an already formed, distinctive group dynamic that is more often inherited than chosen,

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1 Hegel 2013, §304.

2 Hegel 1978, pp. 6–7.

are clearly both formative elements in the final arrival of a collective commitment, a process that can emerge in scores of different forms, depending on the institutions. And all of this is not to deny that there can be unintended consequences of group actions just as there can be for individuals, effects that occur because of what the group did, but which are not intended by the group.

(Again, it is this bi-directionality that is most often misunderstood by critics of Hegel, who read passages that sound like an organicist social theory, in which individuals seem to have no standing except as contributors to and members of the whole, and who see in Hegel the darker side of German romanticism, an anti-individualism. This is a crude, reductionist, not to mention lazy reading of Hegel that is extremely widespread still, and which above all ignores the dialectical character of every important aspect of his position, including this one.)

All of this just introduces the first of the two elements in Hegel’s famous claim about the task of philosophy; philosophy’s time refers to Geist in this “objective” sense. What could he mean by the second element: the Geist of its time “comprehended in thoughts”? Again a suggestion. Sometimes what he says sounds quite implausible. He will say that philosophy gives the form of necessity to what would otherwise appear merely contingent. When this is said about, for example, the development of the empirical sciences,³ it can sound as if Hegel wants to say that the actual course of that development could not have happened otherwise. If this is supported by a claim about a self-transforming, underlying metaphysical entity, “cosmic spirit,” or “God,” developing according to some necessary law of internal teleology, then the claim seems hopeless. At a more modest level, though (and this is how I think he wants to be understood), he could mean that a significant transition in art history, or political history, or religious history, a shift in collective ethical commitments, can be rendered intelligible by a philosophical account. This account is based on a form of practical contradiction that introduces a more familiar form of necessity, the form appropriate to: “he who wills the end must will, or necessarily wills, the means” (otherwise we have evidence that he has not willed the end). If a collective attempt to accomplish some goal can be said to learn collectively that commitment to that end is impossible without commitment to, let us say, a broader and more comprehensive end, then it must pursue such a new end or give up the enterprise. Or, if it develops that the means chosen actually make achieving the end impossible, then the means must be altered. They are not arbitrarily altered. They must be altered, on pain of practical

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3 Hegel 1971, §12A.

incoherence. A philosophical account, assuming the rationality of such a teleological enterprise, can show this. It can give the form of (practical) necessity to what would otherwise seem contingent alterations. I said: “assuming the rationality of such a teleological enterprise.” I meant to recall the Hegelian maxim announced in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*: “To him who looks on the world rationally, the world looks rationally back.”⁴ Here is yet another theme worth several independent lectures.

The lesson here is that what makes a group a group agent is that it possesses a certain form of rational unity (that is a rational way of creating and sustaining a unity, where rational just initially means coherent, no being incompatibly committed), a unity that must be knowingly achieved and sustained. This minimally means that the group is sensitive to inconsistencies in group commitments, empirical facts inconsistent with shared beliefs, and a formation process for commitments and beliefs that is genuinely formative, not merely expressive of collected individual commitments and beliefs. This also implies that some group agent, like “the polis” of ancient Thebes, may take itself to be such a rational unity, but in an enactment of its commitments, discover that it is collectively committed to conceptions of familial obligation and to conceptions of political obligations, all widely shared, that are not practically compatible. Geist can appear to have, be collectively taken to have, the required rational unity, but come to discover that it does not have it. Tragedy ensues. A revision of the commitments is necessary. The community can be said to have learned, and acted on such learning, perhaps, to invoke another play, in the establishment of the homicide courts at the Aeropagus, as in Aeschylus’s *Eumenides*.

Clearly, there can be multiple institutions in a society and these need have no particular relation to one another. This fact raises the question of whether various group agents, like corporations, universities, hospitals, armies, states, churches, could also be said to be, must be understood to be, themselves elements of one “common mind.” But it is not much of a leap to claim that this would be a necessary extension of the account. For one thing, many individuals are often members of several such groups and they could be subject to conflicting or incompatible commitments. The awareness of such conflicts would be unavoidable and so practically incoherent, were there no way of thinking of such several group agents as at least compatible. “Compatible,” though, would still not get us to the more ambitious status of Geist. To reach that, we need a common like-mindedness in which institutional commitments are also

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4 Hegel 1971a, p. 23.

not indifferent to one another even if logically compatible. Rather, they must genuinely cohere, or make some sense as enterprises that belong together. These art practices, for example, would be the art practices engaged in by persons engaged in those religious practices, that civil society, those sorts of universities, that conception of the purposes of an army, that political constitution and so forth. That overall unity would be yet another name for “Geist.” Universities must take account of the religious preferences of their students. Religions must take account of the needs of an army, and so on. We can consider Geist the highest level, self-unifying rational form of unity in a community at a time.

There is little doubt that Hegel thinks of such a super-structural subject as such a substantial unity. To return to the full passage where he introduces the notion in the PhG, he calls Geist,

this absolute substance which constitutes the unity of its oppositions in their complete freedom and self-sufficiency, namely, in the oppositions of the various self-consciousnesses existing for themselves: The I that is we and the we that is.⁵

It is at this level of abstraction that Hegel wants to portray one such collective subject, Western Geist, the distinct inheritor of its Greek beginnings, as engaged in a practical, purposive project, a struggle for full self-understanding across historical time, propelled forward in that attempt by a series of breakdowns in the coherence of its self-consciousness. These breakdowns reflect the practical contradictions that we have discussed. But we are now at such a high level of abstraction that nothing interesting in any overall defense of this suggestion can be said. One way of making these notions more concrete, a way that also gives more substance to the notion of such “breakdowns” is to not the obvious fact that if we can conceive of collective intentionality and group agency, we must also be able to account for collective irrationality. There is one pathology of irrationality in particular explored by Hegel that is of great contemporary resonance.

II

The Platonic Socrates long ago introduced the idea that there is a revealing analogy between the parts of, and the inter-relation among the parts of, the soul and the corresponding parts and inter-relations of the polis. But just how far can we go in extending the categories of

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5 PhG, §174

assessment and analysis at home with individuals in understanding Geist? Psychic and political unity (and so health) is the main issue in the Politeia, and Hegel certainly focuses on that issue too. But he seems to go much farther.

One phenomenon is collective akrasia. It is easily conceivable that at the requisite level of abstraction, a community might express its allegiances to various courses of action; equality before the law, for example. Each person accused should have exactly the same status, entitlements and other freedoms as anyone else. The commitment is formally enshrined in a basic law and is implicitly and explicitly affirmed in various rituals and pronouncements. In practice however, wealthy people turn out to have an enormous advantage, and rates of conviction for persons above a certain income level are strikingly lower. Everyone knows this, and knows of, even affirms, the collective commitment, but no one does anything. The irrationality occurs, we could plausibly suggest, because while the commitment may be sincere (or at least not held hypocritically or in cynical fraudulence), the costs and efforts of realizing it are so high that when occasions emerge to address the problem, it is easier to hedge, dissemble, plead unavoidable constraints, one-time exceptions, etc. If we conceive of both individuals and Geist as some sort of unity among multiple motivational voices clamoring for attention and allegiance, it is not difficult to imagine incentives to attend to one or another voice at the expense of others, the one that provides the easiest or most self-interested path forward. How this exactly happens in either case might not be easy to understand, especially since this contradiction is available to consciousness or public explicitness. In various contexts in the *Phenomenology*, like Virtue and the Way of the World (die Tugend und der Weltlauf), or the Beautiful Soul (die schöne Seele) that cannot bring itself to act, Hegel appears to be thinking of something like this. The standpoint of political virtue demands that the agent “sacrifice” everything of his individuality, his role in the Weltlauf, the political way of the world, but when it comes to acting on such a complete self-denial, it cannot. It cannot live up to its principles without practical incoherence. (Here we have to say as well that what might look like “weakness” might actually be the result of an incomplete and distorted practical self-knowledge.) And Hegel uses the language of strength or force to explain the dilemma that The Beautiful Soul is caught up in.⁶ He says that on a

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⁶ Inasmuch as the self-certain spirit as a beautiful soul does not now possess the strength to empty itself of the self-knowledge which it keeps to itself in itself, it cannot achieve a parity with the consciousness it has repulsed, and thus it cannot achieve the intuited unity of itself in an other, and it cannot attain existence. Hence, the parity comes about merely negatively, as a spirit-less being. PhG §670.

romantic conception of inner purity and the conception of the world as fallen, such a soul cannot “possess the strength” to act on its own self conception without compromising this purity, so on this conception of the fallenness of the world, the solution is not to act. (The beautiful soul is rather like the Nader voter in 2000, repelled by the choice between Gore and Bush, unable to muster the strength actually to vote realistically, opting instead to vote purely symbolically. Or so they claimed in their self-righteousness. They remained pure, beautiful. Gore only lost, if he lost, Florida by five hundred or so votes; Nader had ninety-seven thousand votes, and there is no question Gore would have won if he had not been in the race. No Bush, no Iraq war, no ISIS, no John Roberts, No Samuel Alito, etc. The same sort of thing might be claimed about the “Never Hilary” people, those with an unlimited disgust for Trump, but who think their high-minded principles will not permit them to vote for Hilary. There may be, of course, people who genuinely experience this as a moral dilemma, but in Hegel’s understanding of their commitments, what is important is what they actually do, and how they describe what they do. Given how catastrophically our hypothetical non-voter considers a Trump victory, doing anything to make that more possible looks more like a case of irrationality than an agonized moral dedication to principle.)⁷

But how could one be “pulled” in one way by one of the possible motives at hand, and not be just as aware of the demands of coherent rationality just as clearly as if one were not so “pulled”? Or how can one know the better and do the worse? Whatever problem there is, it does not appear greater in the group than in the individual case, and it seems equally familiar in both. We know what we should do (equal protection), are committed to doing it, and yet we do not do it.

At one point in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel also begins to discuss what he calls “the world of self-alienated Spirit”⁸ and he returns to that characterization in accounting for several phenomena. These are cases of collectively held ideals, like state power and wealth [Staatsmacht und Reichthum], or the availability and inevitability of a perspective on every action of both the valet’s lower, unmasking, deflationary perspective, what Hegel calls Niederträchtigkeit, and yet also a more generous or magnanimous perspective, what he calls Edelmütigkeit. This is similar to the situation described when Hegel assesses the philosophical

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⁷This is admittedly not a welcome form of analysis, as the exposure of posing and self-deceit never is. No one likes to be told that their high-mindedness is actually a case of narcissistic self-adoration. The issue is more difficult because this is not an empirical but an interpretive claim and its aptness depends on what we know about much else the person says and does, and cannot be settled by appeal to some single fact.

⁸ PhG § 793.

significance of tragedy, but in a state of greater Bildung, or cultural maturation, the conflicting commitments do not force a tragic choice, one whereby acting well must also be acting wrongly. Such a state of alienation is a state of irrationality, but at the self-reflective level, in which, given the level of self-knowledge attained by some community, reflective coherence is not possible, a certain kind of dissemblance is needed and is possible. It is also important that Hegel describes this situation as self-alienated Geist. This means that it is not a contingent manifestation that just happens at some moment in time. The situation has not happened to Geist; Geist has done something to bring it about, alienated itself. The phenomenon can thus be rendered philosophically intelligible, along the lines of practical necessity and contradiction discussed before. The situation also means that not only is Geist alienated from itself in this reflective sense, but individuals can not be said to be able experience as coherently satisfiable the claims made on them by their membership in the group unity. They are thus alienated from their own collective identity, bound to it but repelled by it at the same time. Moreover, the processes by which the mutual interdependence of individual and collective identity come to formed are certainly not necessarily fixed, can be as much in dispute as any result of this formation process. One might well find oneself confronted by possibilities of work, or options among ideal general commitments, or political choices, that are not experienced as possible expressions of one's own commitments and talents. They are the only ones available and can appear "strange," foreign, merely positive, and so forth, even though one might voluntarily and effectively affirm them by what one says or does. As with akrasia, though, none of this need be evidence that the group identity or agency is really not what it presents itself as, all because of this alienation. The experience itself suggests rather that something is going wrong, some necessary unity is lacking, something essential to one's practical identity and the realization of that identity is not possible.

But if that phenomenon can be borne only by a kind of dissemblance, there is a natural link with the next phenomenon. For he says such things as the following. In his initial discussion of "True Spirit, Ethical Life" [der wahre Geist, die Sittlichkeit], Hegel first points out that the commonly shared ethical substance of the polis in the classical period,

... breaks itself up into a differentiated ethical essence, into a human and a divine law. Likewise, in terms of its essence, self-consciousness, in confronting

substance, assigns itself to one of these powers, and, as knowledge, it divides itself into both an ignorance of what it is doing and a knowledge of what it is doing, and it is thus a deceived knowledge. [ein betrogenes Wissen]⁹

He is talking here, ultimately, about the way Creon and Antigone argue with each other in Sophocles' play, as if wholly ignorant of the credibility of counter-claims expressed by the other, but not really ignorant. This is an aspect of Hegel's account that is strikingly modern and not much attended to. Each knows what he or she is doing in defending the position, but in pretending not to understand such a claim's relation to credible counter-claims, he or she does not know what he or she is actually doing with its absolutism, and is, in a remarkable phrase, not making a false claim to know, but expressing a "deceived knowledge," a betrogenes Wissen. He thus introduces all the classic problems of self-deceit. How is it possible for some individuals, understood here as paradigmatic representatives of the collective commitments of a historical manifestation of Geist both to know what it knows (in this case that there is a collision of right versus right that is unavoidable) and be ignorant, in some way, make itself ignorant, of what it knows, but does not want to know, insisting instead that this is a case of right versus wrong?

Their paradigmatic status means that Hegel is treating each as manifestations of the collective's emerging consciousness of, and attempted evasion of, incoherence, and not as two isolated cases of willfulness, blindness or self-deceit. They are self-deceived as individuals, but Hegel wants to suggest that there is something quite limited in restricting ourselves to some individualistic genealogy of the origins of such self-deceit as a matter of psychological characteristics. This is not always the case of course. There are plenty of cases of self-deceit that are contingent and manifest nothing of any general social significance. But in cases like this, and the ones we will examine in a moment, the community's representation of itself as possessing the requisite rational unity (collective coherence), has to be understood as as much a matter of self-deceit (one that such tragedies begin to unmask) as what he ascribes to the two individuals. Or, each of them is self-deceived about the "basic law" that makes possible that unity, familial or civic, and we have to understand each of them, as Hegel would have it, as manifesting this collective inability to recognize the failure of any coherence in such a putative unity. That is what accounts for the self-deceit, which would otherwise be a matter of individual pathology (which of course it could be,

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9 PhG. §444.

but the fame and influence of this passage rests on the larger claim about them being something like the modality of the enactment of this social self-deceit and the pressure it creates in the lives of individuals.)¹⁰

This way of looking at individual irrationality is hardly a one off in Hegel. He had introduced the general topic of deception in the section of Reason called, “The spiritual animal kingdom and the real thing.” It is in this section that he insists on the social – that is the public and performative, and thus socially dependent – character of actions. At one point he notes,

Since within this alternation consciousness has one moment for itself as essential in its reflection, while it has another merely externally in consciousness, or for others, what thus comes on the scene is a game individualities play with each other; in this game, each finds himself to be deceiving himself as much he finds each to be mutually deceiving each other.¹¹

This seems like a kind of riot of deception and self-deception. And it is important to note again that Hegel is not talking here about individual pathologies. As with collective akrasia, there is some general disconnect between a collective self-representation, and what such a group or super-group agent actually does. In all three cases we have seen, the problem is the achievement of the unity necessary for rational (that is, minimally coherent) action. In fact, these appeals to self-deception appear to be much more important or inclusive than akrasia. Our case of an expressed commitment to equality before the law, matched by no effective action, is much more likely an indication that there is no such commitment.¹² In this sense, there can clearly be collectively self-deceit. Accounted for this way, it means that the interesting originality of Hegel’s account of self-deception in this and many other cases is that it is not exclusively psychological, not a matter of a subject “hiding” something from, and

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¹⁰ I do not want to deny that Hegel’s position is a disputable interpretation of Sophocles’s play. He cites no evidence of lines, ignores passages where Antigone makes clear she knows that she is breaking the law, and her occasional doubts. In general, he seems just to infer that each must know that this is a conflict of right with right, but has no language or any vehicle for admitting and dealing with this.

¹¹ PhG §415

¹² In general, it is certainly possible to consider self-deceit a form of akrasia, that one is too weak to admit to oneself what one knows about one’s own motives. But the two phenomena still seem to me categorically different. One can “reform” an akratic by offering help and strength, but if someone denies (successfully) that he has a commitment that he does in fact have, or is acting against what he would avow, the strategy for some remediation has to be much different.

inside, itself, prompting a hunt for deeper and real motives. The actuality of a motive is apparent only in action, in what one is willing to do. It is in this enactment that self-deception, that this disconnect, manifests itself. If we think of both individual and group agents as multitudes of possible voices for different motives, we will then look to how any agent might avow one intention that is possible but not manifest in deeds, and then dissemble. This might involve a plausible but still false description of the act content itself. At any rate, such appears to be the central claim in the Spiritual Animal Kingdom section. The Beautiful Soul could just as easily be said not to be committed to his view of action, because he does not act on it. He is self-deceived, not weak.

In discussing Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew* and what is the height of self and social alienation in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel again invokes the concept of deception. In discussing “the musician,” he means to say that the nephew’s claim to be identity-less, and so capable of theatrically enacting any role, that there is no difference between such theatricality and the real social functions, is not only false, and not only deceives others, but is a case of self-deceit.

The content of spirit’s speech about itself and its speech concerning itself is thus the inversion of all concepts and realities. It is thus the universal deception of itself and others, and, for that very reason, the greatest truth is the shamelessness in stating this deceit.¹³

Finally, there is Hegel’s most pointed example, that of modern moralism. This occurs when some agent, or group agent, or super-structural group agent, Geist, assumes the role of moral judge and subjects everyone to a rigorous moral accounting, one in which they are always found wanting, never truly acting dutifully but always self-interestedly. (Again to say that Geist can assume the role of moral judge is just to say that there is a means of collective self-representation that is not a mere summative result, and avows adherence to such ideals.) Such rigoristic condemnation is, Hegel thinks he can show, irrational, self-contradictory even, and Hegel suggests that no one can be presumed to have adopted such a stance without also being aware that it is so. It demands that individuals not be the individuals they are, that morality is asking for some conformity to strict standards that are impossible to fulfill. He suggests also that this realization will eventually win out, that there will be something equivalent to the Christian confession that

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¹³ PhG, §521.

“we are all sinners,” and this confession will occasion some mutual forgiveness. This is a strange moment in the *Phenomenology*, as if he thinks that the burden of this rigoristic moralism and the self-deception it requires, is impossible to bear. Whereas many of the other transitions in the book seem to follow some intellectual or conceptual realization of a practical contradiction, this one seems more existential and dramatic. But no matter for our purposes, he was obviously wrong in any sense about this. Such self-deception can clearly be borne quite well. Indeed, self-deceived moralism has reached something like epidemic proportions in the post-Hegelian world, our world, something that is not merely the “fault” of the self-deceived, but also of their audience. Gullibility is also a form of self-deceit (“hearing what one wants to hear”) and is as culpable. As Bernard Williams pointed out, in such cases deceiver and deceived are actually “conspiring” with one another.

III

This leaves us with many questions. For one thing, while Hegel invokes the concept of self-deception in an ancient context, it is not an ancient notion, does not it seem to have any resonance in that literature. Hence the question: when did it first become an important analytic tool, and might this show us some characteristic of the modern condition itself? For another, the question might naturally arise: is there anything more involved in the notion of a collectivity in self-deceit than that many or most of its individuals are self-deceived? The brief answer would be yes, because self-deceit about collective commitments is not simply a fixed disposition in individuals to ignore contrary evidence. It requires in effect a kind of silent conspiracy of unacknowledgement, reinforced by mutual assurances, common strategies for avoiding the truth, support of collective practices that make this easier rather than harder, and it depends on the simple, comforting weight of common confidence that, despite failure to act on the commitment, we are at least “trying.”

There is also the question of its possibility, or how one might dispel the aura of complete paradox that surrounds it. I have already suggested one way in which that might go, given Hegel’s unusual understanding of the inner-outer relation in action. But the larger question involves a return to our earlier reflections on the bearing of Hegel’s treatment of historical Geist

In fact, there is, from Hegel’s point of view, reason to believe that the complexity of our situation has created something quite unprecedented that only his philosophy, with its ability to explain the “positive” role of the negative, and the reality of group agency and collective subjectivity, can account for. Life in modern societies seems

to have created the need for uniquely dissociated collective doxastic states, a repetition of the various characters in the drama of self-deceit narrated by the *Phenomenology*. This is one wherein we sincerely believe ourselves committed to fundamental principles and maxims we are actually in no real sense committed to, given what we do. (This would be the sense in which Kierkegaard thought most modern people were (that is, were not) “Christians.” This is not an idle reference. How else might we explain something like some “association of wealthy robber baron Christians” (which must exist somewhere), or billionaire Communists?¹⁴ The principles can be consciously and sincerely acknowledged and avowed, but, given the principles they are, cannot be integrated into a livable, coherent form of life. (The social conditions for self-deceit in this sort of context can help show that the problem is not rightly described as one where many individuals happen to fall into self-deceit. The analysis is not a moral one, not focused on individuals. It has to be understood as a matter of historical Geist, in the sense in which it is the point of this paper to make plausible. Or, on the other hand, we are committed to various policies that, nevertheless, we would, again in all sincerity and by means of the various representative practices available to Geist at a time, disavow, even though our actions again betray us.¹⁵ In his early works, Hegel claimed that the need for modern philosophy itself arises as an attempt at a reconciliation of what modern philosophy had left in “disunity.” [Entzweiung]¹⁶ and a striking sort of disunity is this dissociated relation to ourselves. This seems especially to be the case in the political world.

Of course, it is also the case that there is in modern politics, as perhaps there has always been, massive outright, deliberate deception

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14 For all of Kierkegaard’s explicit and contemptuous anti-Hegelianism, this situation is perfectly Hegelian, given that Hegel defines “the one thing needful to achieve scientific progress [as] ... the recognition of the logical principle that negation is equally positive.” Hegel 2010, 21.38. (The translator has listed the German pages cited in the margins of his translation, so reference may now be made to the German pagination alone, by the volume number of page of the German critical edition, in the manner of references to the Akademie Ausgabe of Kant.) In Kierkegaard’s terms, those who take themselves to be Christian are really not Christians, where this does not mean they are Muslims or Jews or atheists; they are NON-Christians. And conversely, there is also a principled way of not-being a Christian (realizing its enormous difficulty, perhaps its impossibility) which is the only way one can be a Christian. (This touches on a well known objection to Hegel: that he confuses contrariety with contradiction.) I use Kierkegaard as a dramatic example, but there any number of ordinary ones. “We all believe” that global warming is precipitating an unprecedented catastrophe. Do we?

15 In Pippin 2008, I try to show what conception of subjective mindedness and objective, public deed we need, according to Hegel, in order to account for such states, and suggest why they should not be seen as exceptional, or isolated puzzle case. See Chapter Six of that book.

16 Hegel 1968, p. 9.

and fraud. This is sometimes even praised, not just admitted as necessary. I mean Machiavelli's famous case that the needs and interests of government are sufficiently different from those of individuals as to justify, even to regard as virtuous, practices of deception.¹⁷ So the NSA claimed not to be doing what Snowden's documents showed they were doing, and they certainly knew that. No doubt there was some self-deceit involved in the justification, but they knew they were lying through their teeth. There are also many other examples and they are not limited to politics. Cigarette companies discounted the risks of smoking, even as they knew otherwise. One could go on almost infinitely.

But collective self-deceit of the kind explored – and I would say, for the first time explored – by Hegel is a different and arguably an even more widespread phenomenon. As Bernard Williams pointed out, the entire political world now seems inconceivable without it, with politics understood as the field on which what plays out is an externalization of a particular sort of group agent, government. Political actors are presented, and present themselves, Williams suggests, like actors in a soap opera, playing roles in which they neither cynically pretend to represent positions they know to be false (not always or mostly, anyway), nor, given the theatricality, exaggeration, “posing,” and the “protest too much” rhetoric, do they comfortably and authentically inhabit those roles. Williams's description is memorable.

They are called by their first names or have the same kind of jokey nicknames as soap opera characters, the same broadly sketched personalities, the same dispositions to triumph and humiliations which are schematically related to the doings of other characters. One believes in them as one believes in characters in a soap opera: one accepts the invitation to half believe them.¹⁸

He goes on to say that

...politicians, the media, and the audience conspire to pretend that important realities are being considered, that the actual word is being responsibly addressed.

And of course it is not being addressed. The whole strategy is an

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¹⁷ Williams 2005, p 607.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 615.

attempt to avoid doing so.

Despite everything that has been said here, I realize that it may still strain credibility, even plausibility, to say that this is all best accounted for by saying that Geist, in this case, the communal Geist of a nation, is, in its self-representations, engaging in collective self-deceit. Much more would have to be said to pin the notion down. But it means that there is perhaps a different and better way to assess the possible contemporary bearing of Hegel's social and political philosophy than the “remaining points of contact,” institutional approach. In point of fact, this bearing is tightly connected with the general issue of collective self-deceit. As presented here, such a phenomenon is a means for avoiding the acknowledgment of what one nonetheless knows to be true: that there is a disconnect between consciously held principles of action, and the actual actions that result. The need for such a strategy can be understood by understanding that the basic claim of the Philosophy of Right, about the practical irrationality that would result were not the institutions of Abstract Right and Morality understood as moments within an overarching, common ethical life or *Sittlichkeit*. If it is true that without such an ethical commonality, and, crucially, its distinguishability from civil society, various collective principles would appear insufficient, irrational, subject to practical contradictions, then understandably, the temptation to collective self-deceit would be great; greater and greater even.

I would suggest that this is exactly the situation we find ourselves in, in anonymous mass societies, in which the absence of what, according to Hegel, amounts to genuine commonality, *Sittlichkeit*, is a felt absence, not merely an indeterminate absence. Understanding such a situation as essential to understanding the prevalence of collective self-deceit is preferable, I suggest in conclusion, to pointing to some sort of moral decay in individuals, inauthenticity or moral cowardice, something that would itself be an instance of the self-deceit Hegel detects in the institution of modern moralism.

IV

This prompts a last, more general comment. One could say that Hegel's revolutionary innovation in modern political thought (together with Rousseau) was to identify kinds of social pathologies and wrongs beyond violations of rights and unequal material welfare. Issues like vanity, inauthenticity, psychologically damaging forms of dependence, manipulation in the guise of political dialogue, and collective irrationalities such as self-deceit, or harms that can occur in what Hegel summarized as that “struggle for recognition,” were all to be treated as critical political issues. This is because such pathologies clearly can

distort political will formation in democracies, can corrupt the public sphere in all sorts of ways, can degrade the credibility of the leaders of a regime. Allegiance to a regime, especially up to the point of the “ultimate” sacrifice, is clearly not dependent on or even much informed by, the best philosophical argument for the state’s monopoly on legitimate violence. Understanding such allegiance and what degrades it is a vital issue in political psychology, something that is not any longer a central topic in modern political theory or philosophy.¹⁹

These considerations would suggest that such a political psychology must also involve something like a depth form of social psychology. I suggested above that Hegel’s account helps us to begin to understand the strategies involved in a collective agent’s attempts to preserve and sustain a common-minded form of self-deceit about its own incoherence and pathological irrationality, and I want to endorse his suggestion that such self-deceit was ever more likely, the less our common fate is experienced as sustained by a common ethical life, a common sense of ethical purpose and significance. That is, at least, the beginning of his analysis of what has promoted the prevalence of this form of irrationality.

As I write this, the United States has, in its presidential campaign, lived through a manifestation of collective irrationality in the form of massive self-deceit; so widespread that is barely imaginable, even though we lived it. The vote brought to power a candidate so manifestly incompetent and unsuited that it is impossible to believe that Trump voters intended to do this out of sheer ignorance, or self-interested greed, or any such (barely) “rational” motive. We exhaust ourselves throwing up our hands in despair of understanding “how all the rules have changed.” It is understandable that intelligent, thoughtful people should be wary of treating their fellow citizens as “sick patients,” patronizingly thinking themselves exempt from such analysis. (And Hegel of course does not use the term. Its original context is soul-health and soul-sickness Plato’s *Republic*.) But that wariness is warranted only in participation in political life. A more spectatorial position is also possible, although modern political thought has become so empiricistic and positivist that it is difficult to imagine now how the work begun by Rousseau and Hegel, and carried on by such figures as Marcuse and Adorno, however called for, could get any kind of grip in modern social or political science or in political philosophy.

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 19 “For a fuller discussion of “political psychology” see Pippin 2010.”ts Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant)n his films wersity Press, rns and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford

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