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Interview with Robert Pippin: The Actuality of Hegel

**Frank Ruda &
Agon Hamza**

Each of these questions would obviously require a book-length discussion in order to answer philosophically. What I will try to do is just state what I believe to be Hegel's claims in as economical a form as possible, and not try to defend them here. Such brevity will mean that some responses will inevitably sound dogmatic, other obvious, and still others too elliptical. Answers to all the question's also presume a proper reading of *The Philosophy of Right*, especially Hegel's understanding of it as an account of "Objective Spirit" in his *Encyclopedia*, and absent that (impossible here), the following will have to count as suggestions for a reading of Hegel.

Let us begin with the most obvious question: 250 years later: why should we still read and be interested in Hegel's Philosophy of Right? Differently put, what is still pertinent in this book, considering the concepts he defends therein, some which in our epoch cannot but appear to be outdated and almost indefensible: we are thinking of the figure of the monarch, the necessity of war, to single out just these two (we do add the role and function of the family maybe - but this depends on how we read it, obviously). In what sense can we say this book to be of contemporary relevance, if it has any at all?

The central question of political philosophy is the question of justice. The core of most modern approaches to the question concerns legitimacy. Weber's question is paramount: what distinguishes the organized use of force by one group of people against another group, from the legitimate exercise of state power over its citizens. The answer is assumed to be that the latter is rational, rests on reasons that any rational being must accept, and this usually involves some claim about the "rationally re-constructed consent of the governed," determined sometimes in somewhat fanciful counterfactual ways. With respect to social justice, the question concerns the rational distribution of the resources and benefits available in an historical period. Arguments about this range from answers based on the equal moral standing of any individual to approaches that give priority to some notion of just deserts.

Hegel's objections are well-known. Legitimacy is not at the center of his concerns. He does not separate that issue from several others about the worthiness of institutions. He denies that any obligation can be derived from the idealized consent of putatively "stateless," atomistically conceived individuals. There are no such individuals, and this idealization ignores essential features of human being necessary in any reflection on such questions. He denies that the primary bond between citizens and the state is obligation or is in any way contractual. He agrees that the mark of a free being is rationality, but he denies that some exceptionless nomological principle, supposedly agreed to in idealized conditions, is the mark of rationality.

He has instead a substantive and not a formal theory of rationality. Human beings are essentially rationally reflective, socially dependent, *historically self-transformative* embodied free beings. If he is right about this, then every aspect of our reflection on just political and social institutions must take account of it, and our understanding of what it is to be such a being must be historically diagnostic, not “ideal.” (This is sometimes called a “naturalism,” and while that can be misleading in the Hegelian context, it is not wrong.) We must try to understand what a historical life at a time is like, does to, inspires in, the persons who find themselves subject to it. If they come to live in a way that, as he would put it, does not agree with the right concept or Geist, then that way is irrational and unjust. His claim about social dependence is ontological not empirical, concerns what it is to be a person at all. This means that a human being can only be what it is, a free being, in participating with others in institutions like the family, civil society and the state. That institutions (or their late modern successors) can be shown to be necessary to realize that conception of human beings is the core of his case. I don’t see this position much represented in mainstream political philosophy (or in modern constitutional liberal societies for that matter) and I think it deserves a hearing.

His full claim about social dependence is that the realization of freedom for such a being consists in: “being with oneself in an other,” often otherwise expressed in the PR as a unity of subjective and objective freedom. Remarkably, Hegel’s prized examples of actualized freedom are love and friendship. Under liberal presuppositions, we would normally think that in order for all and each to be free, a particular subject must sacrifice a full realization of freedom in pragmatic consideration of the other’s freedom. That is what Hegel wants to avoid, seeing an other who is unavoidably impacted by what one does as a hinderance to what would have been full freedom, so that we must accept that we can’t be fully free. He thinks the right sort of institutions will make it possible to experience others and objective institutions as the full realization of freedom rather than its sacrifice. So, I don’t compromise my freedom for the sake of a friend or a child; I see their good as my own as well as theirs. This descends from Hegel’s interest in the role of love in early Christian communities. Just institutions can be shown to conform to that requirement.

Our socially dependent and historically self-transformative nature also means that our experience of this mutuality cannot be merely formal or legal. This is the basis of his insistence that modern institutions must embody the *experience* of equal standing and respect among participants. Controversially, he does not think this requires full material equality (although it is inconsistent with extreme inequalities in material well-being), but the experience of recognitive respect. The social institutions, like Corporations and the Estates, that he thought could help accomplish

this are no longer relevant today, but a Hegelian approach would involve the search for the possibility of such mediating institutions, in which such standing is real, lived out. My own view, which I take to be inspired by Hegel's approach, is that the character of neo-liberal, globalized finance capitalism make such a search futile, and would count "for a Hegelian" as profound injustice, not a worry about "how people feel about themselves."

This particularly concerns the world of work. Especially in his lectures, Hegel's concerns about the organization of labor in early capitalism already reflect a pessimism that a reformist approach to such practices would be possible. "A factory presents a sad picture of the deadening (*Abstumpfung*) of human beings, which is also why on Sundays factory workers lose no time in spending and squandering their entire weekly wages." This is an aspect of Hegel's position that is relatively unexplored.

None of this requires a commitment to a patriarchal nuclear family, non-deliberative legislatures, weird voting practices, guilds, a monarch or periodic wars, although Hegel clearly thought it did.

Could you say a couple of words about the perspective the Philosophy of Right involves for you? You have mentioned that the famous owl of Minerva passage at the end of its preface (that indicates that philosophy always comes too late to tell the world how it ought to be) indicates that Hegel cannot simply give a normative account of what a just state and social organization looks like. But what does this mean for you for the overall perspective of the book?

I understand Hegel's social and political thought to be a realism, as that term is understood today. This means that reflection on political and social order must begin with human beings "as they are," and in Hegel that means, "as they have come to be." But access to such a beginning orientation is not straightforwardly empirical. It is interpretive, and also requires some account of why they are as they have come to be. To many this seems impossibly ambitious, that the late modern world is too fragmented, religiously and culturally diverse for any such an attempt to succeed. But from a "Hegelian" point of view (not the historical Hegel's) there are sufficiently widespread features of the organization of power in modern societies to make such an interpretive-diagnostic task possible. With some variations, the organization of labor under global capitalism, and its material inequalities and humiliating working conditions, a consumerist culture, the extreme concentration of wealth in ever fewer hands, the decreasing power of states in the face of finance capitalism, the phenomenon of mass migrations and the apparent inability of advanced societies to eliminate racism and sexism that increase with the disappearance of the nation state are substantial enough to count as a coherent object of critique. Any assessment of whether such a form of life

allows human beings to live in a way that allows for the realization of the rationally reflective, self-determining, socially dependent beings that they are, requires that we have some comprehensive understanding of real life under such conditions, and this seems to me far more challenging than has been acknowledged. In addition, one of the virtues of Hegel's realism is that he does not treat the question of our allegiance to, investment in, willingness to work for and sacrifice for what such a form of life requires as a matter of the superiority of a discursive argument that we should. It must be understood as a natural expression of the kinds of desires, concerns, self-understanding that a society produces in its citizens, including an experience of the frustration of these capacities. Parts of his early *Phenomenology of Spirit* are more helpful here than *The Philosophy of Right*, but properly interpreted, I believe his account of *Sittlichkeit*, dated as it is, can help us how to understand how to begin to do this. Finally, if rational self-interest and a calculation of material advantages cannot be the basis of such allegiance to public social and political order, Hegel's owe us an account of what the "belonging" required for the social solidarity he sees as so valuable consists in. Hegel was not a proponent of the nation state as that came to be understood after Herder, but his accounts of the institutions and practices that comprise the "Bildung" of burghers are inadequate for a mass, culturally diverse societies, and anyone interested in Hegel has the task of explaining what could contribute to this desideratum in modern societies.

To follow up on this. Hegel is (in)famous for conceptualizing philosophy as "its own time comprehended in thoughts." Like everyone and everything else, philosophy is the child of its time. As you have pointed out, our time is not that of Hegel's, it is indeed very different. So, how can his concept of Geist, as you see it, be upheld for our contemporary present, politically and otherwise?

Assume for the sake of argument that Hegel's "*Logic*," as summarized in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, is a relatively successful account of all possible intelligibility, an account of all account-giving and one that makes room for and shows the necessity of forms of rendering intelligible dismissed by empiricist and formal-mathematical paradigms. I have argued that this enterprise should count as a metaphysics, an account of being in general: that to be is to be determinately intelligible and so the specification of logical determinability is the specification of possible determinate being. In this interpretation, the so-called "*Realphilosophie*," the *Philosophy of Nature* and the *Philosophy of Spirit*, are not then simply deduced from such a theory of pure thinking. Both make reference to historical practices and institutions and attempt to interpret them as proper embodiments of the being of nature and of Geist, in the terms laid out by the *Logic*, that Hegel wants to deduce philosophically what nature must

be or what human being and its history must be. I consider it absurd to think that Hegel believed that physics and biology and the other sciences and human history had come to some sort of end in the first third of the nineteenth century, and as the Owl of Minerva passage indicates, he is inviting us to attempt the same reflection with developments after this period. Hegel obviously could not do this; he is a retrospective not prophetic thinker. We have to.

This is a crude summary, and it leaves out a massive difficulty. Since Hegel denies any strict separability between pure thinking and intuition, this should have implications for the theory of pure thinking itself. And this means that the character of his account in the *Realphilosophie* must already be reflected in *the Logic*. What “already reflected in” and “not separate from” can mean here requires a much longer account. Thinking it through properly should mean something Hegel apparently does not accept: that the status of knowability, “logically conceived”, *changes*, and not simply because of the accumulation of empirical knowledge or scientific revolutions. This has implications for his doctrine of the “historical a priori,” i.e., what must be assumed and cannot be denied in a form of life, but which cannot be derived.

Hegel does offer a number of ways in which we - to use a vocabulary close to the one you proposed - can consider the organization of ethical life as being part of a collective practice and realization of rational agencies. Where precisely can we locate rationality here for you? And how would we account for its inner temporality (not only in the sense that rationality is itself and evolves, unfolds, transforms historically, but also in the sense that it seems to imply a temporality similar to the one that the position of Philosophy of Right implies)?

I have already said I believe that Hegel has a substantive rather than formal conception of rationality (like Aristotle's but different in that he treats Geist as historically self-transformative) and treats such human beings as fundamentally, or ontologically, socially dependent beings, and that the realization of freedom requires not merely the absence of arbitrarily external constraint, but the achievement of a kind of social solidarity he calls being-with-self-in-other. Being free is being free to live as one is, as such a socially dependent being, or to live “in the truth.” (This is of course the source of a great deal of panic about the supposedly totalitarian implications of “positive freedom.”) This is too controversial to try to defend here, but I believe it entails that for him rationality in this context is a social practice, the mutual offering of considerations that persons offer others when what they do conflicts with what others would otherwise be able to do. But such an exchange of considerations need not be argumentative reasons, but considerations tied to various possible modes of reconciliation with others. It will sound strange to say

so, but he considers art and religion as involved in this reconciliatory attempt as well. More concretely, various things Hegel defends can and still out to be defended today: basic rights protection in a rule of law, individual moral responsibility (for what was intentionally done, not what happens because of what I do), the free choice of an occupation and marriage partners, autonomy and independence as the goal of familial education, some means for the concrete and recognized expression of one's distinctive personhood, including private property, social solidarity as a common good, a representative state. There are many aspects of his position that cannot be defended, including the patriarchal family and a non-deliberative legislature, just as there are many aspects of his accounts of art, religion and history that cannot be defended.

The Philosophy of the Right ends with what Eduard Gans once described as the disappearance of the state in the ocean of history - which was in part a reason why the end of the Philosophy of Right that conceptually coincided with the end of the state, was taken to be philosophically and conceptually good news by some (rather on the left, obviously). Hegel does seem to indicate that there is no eternal state and that (world-)history is necessarily the history of the state(s), which implies that the coming to be and the ceasing to be of states is what makes and manifests history. Do you agree with this assessment? And if this might be the case, what precisely does this mean for the historicity within a state? We are asking this also vis-a-vis the present and contemporary conjuncture, which is, especially due to the pandemic, often described in terms of an evaporation of historical time and Hegel himself indicates several times that our collective habits can make what are actual achievements of freedom disappear and make them appear as if they had been there all along (Hegel is talking for example about the security of a safe street in a state).

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A very difficult question. It involves what has already been discussed here as Hegel's historical realism, and aspects of historical development that he does not think can disappear without ethical harm, like the distinction between civil society and the state. What he did not appreciate was how badly modern capitalism would require massive state intervention, and how such a situation after World War One would invite the major stake holders in civil society to work to obliterate this distinction between the regulatory and the political state or that they would succeed so decisively after the rise of neoliberalism.

This does not mean resignation to a historical fatalism. The dissolution of this distinction also means the absence of allegiance to a common good, or any strategy of *Bildung* that could restore it. This is something that threatens everything from public education to all forms of

social insurance to the merely theatrical character of modern elections to “the security of a safe street in a state.” If Hegel is even minimally right about historical change, this situation ought to prove (eventually) unbearable. There are indications today that it is.

When Hegel accounts for what subjectively allows for the coherence and inner consistency of ethical life, he starts talking about patriotism or patriotic attitude. It entails a form of true certainty and a form of habitualized willing. He also describes it as a form of trust. What do you make of this concept and conceptual concatenation?

The kind of trust and solidarity Hegel thinks is required for a good social order (even for the proper functioning of capitalism) cannot be created by legislation but must emerge as the product of the experiences of individuals in a modern form of life. Such an experience, given what he thinks is necessary to create and sustain it, is, on his premises, not possible in contemporary life, for reasons already sketched.

Michael Theunissen some years ago suggested that when Hegel moves from the philosophy of objective spirit on the one hand side into the philosophy of history and on the other into the philosophy of absolute spirit in the shapes of art, religion and philosophy, this raises the question of how to precisely conceive of the “sublation” of the objective sphere of spirit, i.e. of politics, within absolute spirit. To reduce his argument massively and articulate as a question: is there a politics of absolute spirit? If so, how to conceive of it? If not, why not?

Briefly no. In my view it would be wrong to look in Hegel for a “politics of Absolute Spirit.” “Politics” is at home in modern *Sittlichkeit*, and the advantage of Hegel’s position is his insistence on differentiated if also interconnected domains of normativity. Whatever we might recognize as the potentially “political” dimensions of Hegel’s account of art, religion and philosophy – that is, their embodying and expressing values and self-understandings that cannot but be reflected in political life as well – is certainly possible, but this is not at all because some philosophical position is correct and practical implications ought to *follow* from it. Philosophy may be its own time reflected in thought, but it is also the case that philosophy itself is expressive of, rather than determinative for, its time. Recall from his Preface: “As a philosophical composition” a philosophy of right “must distance itself as far as possible from the obligation to construct a state as it ought to be.”

We want to end with one final question: “can one” and maybe ought one “be a Hegelian today?” This can be obviously answered by two alternatives: Yes or No. Of course, one can be anything today. But the

real question might arise when we agree that one can be a Hegelian,; what kind of a Hegelian, do you think, one can, or should be, today?

Since I can imagine solutions to the problems of material inequality, or legal responses to political injustices, or economic responses to inefficient wealth creation for equitable distribution, that still leave unaddressed the basic values of human dignity and self-respect, or the institutional embodiment of genuine mutuality of recognition, including but not limited to grave economic injuries to the possibility of such respect and mutuality (or even to a survivable life itself), I think there are Hegelian insights into the developing arc of modern societies that ought not be forgotten and that can be learned from. I don't think it is helpful to concern oneself too much with whether one is "Hegelian enough" to be "a Hegelian," or a "Marxist" or "democratic socialist" for that matter. The core of his basic insight is the same as Marx's – that the bourgeois revolution in philosophy was the most transformative moment of liberation in the history of the world, and that its deficiencies and irrationality and psychologically humiliating developments should not be seen as a rejection of its core ideal of freedom but as a provocation for its realization. I would prefer to leave the matter at that.