German Idealism and Modernity, or Thinking Freedom

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The period 1780 to 1830 is one of the most fruitful times in the history of European philosophy and political thought, rivalling the achievements of classical Athens between Plato and Aristotle. German idealism, the philosophical current originating in the critical works of Immanuel Kant, is an extended reflection on the idea of freedom and on the prospects for its realisation in the modern world. It is both 'German' and 'idealist' in special senses. Germany at that time was a welter of kingdoms, principalities, dukedoms, and city states, under the titular leadership of the Holy Roman Empire (founded by Charlemagne in 800 AD) until Napoleon abolished it in 1806, leaving various political institutions and nationalist movements to struggle for hegemony in its wake. Scattered throughout this territory, from the extreme north-east to the south-west, were intellectual centres such as Kant's own Königsberg (geographically remote, but a commercial hub in close communication with Britain); Jena, where Schiller and Fichte both lectured; Goethe's Weimar; and the Tübingen of Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling (see Boyle 2000). Later in the period, with its newly-founded university, Berlin was to play a leading cultural role. In these centres, the effects of the European Enlightenment and the French Revolution, adaptations of the new Scottish and English political economy, and critiques of the older indigenous theoretical traditions stemming from Leibniz and Christian Wolff, were distilled into a philosophical revolution. The essence of this revolution was an engagement with modern society, and an account of its emergence and potentialities, undertaken in works by figures like Schiller, Fichte, and Hegel, with Kant in the vanguard (see Pinkard 2002, 1-15). It is this resolute yet critical modernism which imbues German idealism with its particular

characteristics: for all its inner divergences,[1] it is a *practical* idealistic approach, a brilliant vindication of freedom. The task here is first to examine this approach in its intellectual context, distinguishing it from other types of Enlightenment thinking, and then to explore in greater detail the ideas of the will and freedom, with the intent of identifying weaknesses in rival and currently dominant accounts, such as liberalism and Romantically-tinged post-modernism.

In its vindication of freedom, German idealism from Kant to Hegel differs from other types of idealist thinking (for a survey, Vesey 1982). It is distinct from Platonic idealism because it rejects the view of a transcendent intellectual order of formal perfection, of which the material world is an inexact replica; it is closer to Aristotle's sense of *energeia*, the shaping presence of form in matter, but is more insistent than Aristotle on the activity of *subjects* as the sources of form. It is not an idealism which reduces all being to thought, or which is sceptical about the existence of the external world. It is not to be confused with the phenomenalism and subjectivism of Bishop Berkeley, for whom all being is mere perception. For Berkeley we are not entitled to assert an objective foundation or correlate for such perception; here being dissolves into seeming, or appearance. Against such 'dogmatic' or 'empirical' idealism, the Kantian tradition mounts a decisive assault (Beiser 2002). The fundamental issue of German idealism is not to impugn the external world, but to ask how we can rationally and freely relate to it, and act in it. This practical idealism is fundamentally critical of objective historical and social conditions which hinder free self-determination.

German Idealism and Enlightenment

It is common in the secondary literature to view the German territories in the eighteenth

[1] The scope of this paper precludes discussing these divergences in any detail, though they can be quite sharp. On continuity and shifts in the post-Kantian tradition, see Pippin 1989.

and at the turn of the nineteenth century as a cultural backwater, and its thinkers as representative at best of a highly attenuated modernism (Hunter 2001, Oz-Salzberger 2002); but this view is fundamentally misconceived. Though it emerges on the terrain of the Enlightenment, German idealism represents a significant advance on Enlightenment thinking. Acknowledging his debt to Enlightenment, Kant (1970a) describes this period as an epochal turning point: the shaking off of self-imposed tutelage, marking the historical maturation of the species: individuals now find it possible and necessary to give a rational, independent account of themselves and of the maxims which are to govern their activities, without relying on external authorities. As Hegel puts it, the great merit of the Enlightenment is its discovery that everything exists for the subject (Hegel 1955, 426-27). Any acceptable normative and political order, after the founding revolutions of modernity (intellectually, in the Enlightenment; politically, in France), must have human subjects, their consciousness, and their needs, as its guiding principle. Traditional and transcendent sources of authority are gradually deprived of their unreflective influence. As these inherited forms are exposed to critique, in favour of rationally sanctioned relations, subjects acquire increasing mastery over social processes which have restricted their free, self-determining activity. This view has important implications for politics, and for human activity generally. To be legitimate, the ends of political action must be understood as expressive of the will of subjects, who must see themselves as the source both of these ends, and of the authority and justification that these ends command (see Taylor 1991, 81-91). Moreover, the Enlightenment demystifies not only traditional authority, but also the idea of nature. The 'disenchantment' of the world, of which Max Weber was to speak, describes this changed relation between subjects and their environment, the norms governing action, and the character of action itself. The formative activity of subjects in the world is no longer construed as a

mimetic reproduction of fixed models, but is taken to exemplify the innovation and creativity of emancipated thinking. We no longer derive our ethical and aesthetic standards from the supposition of a fixed natural order, a view dominant in various forms since Plato, but from an idea of the self and its purposes. Freedom becomes the primary value. This does not entail an antinomianism or denial of all law, but asks in different ways what the self may rightfully claim and do.

Building on Enlightenment conceptions, the Kantian tradition also undertakes a critique and reformulation of these ideas. If it is an emphatic modernism, it is also a critical one. It is an advance on both Enlightenment empiricism and rationalism. Let us take each of these currents in turn, noting the revisions which German idealism effects. The empiricist and materialist theorists of the Enlightenment (Helvetius, Holbach, Bentham) had understood the centrality of the subject through categories like utility; the world existed as material for the satisfaction of need, and the maximisation of happiness. Despite its radicalism in some respects, ancient materialism, notably Epicureanism, had shared the views of older classical (idealist) philosophies that nature set intractable limits on our efforts, so that our aim should be to minimise pain, not to maximise pleasure. Otherwise we committed hubris, and invited nemesis. But modern materialisms typically take a more expansive view of human capabilities, and of the responsiveness of nature.[2] On the Kantian account, however, these modern currents had in important respects failed to grasp the nature of subjectivity adequately. They had constricted the sense of activity by subsuming it under natural imperatives of a new kind. If nature had been deprived of its older normative force, and was now viewed as a field of scientific investigation, manipulation, and usefulness, it continued to exert imperatives on subjects in a different sense, not in requiring

[2] Recently, environmentalism has proven a salutary reminder of the hubris of these unbounded efforts. It is not necessary to revert to an ancient vision of natural limits, however. In Kantian idiom, we must learn to legislate limits to ourselves.

them to limit their interventions, but in determining what those interventions were. Hobbes promoted the view that individuals were naturally determined in their desires and their ends; their thinking and willing were causally subject to natural necessity (the pushes and pulls exerted on us by the things we encountered), which subjects then enacted in their activity. Thus it is not correct to hold, as contemporary analysts do, that the Enlightenment abstracts from nature, leaving Romanticism to rediscover it in a new, modern guise (Taylor 1989). Rather, Enlightenment materialism held in general that nature moulded subjects, and placed them under strict causal rules. Nature fixed the character of subjects and their deeds; actions were determined by natural need (even if this was now seen to be elastic). Reflecting on this problem in the mid-nineteenth century, Marx, himself deeply imbued with German idealism, observes the essentially passive character of previous (Enlightenment) materialism, its tendency to subordinate individuals to natural impulses, and its privileging of consumption over production. He sees his own version of materialism, based on labour, as indebted to the activist notions of his idealist precursors (Marx 1976).

The more immediate Kantian response was to deepen the understanding of reason. First, Kant distinguished between empirical and pure practical reason (Kant 1956). The former was the domain of need satisfaction, based upon hypothetical imperatives: if we want X, we must do Y (or A, B, C in correct sequence); but *empirical* practical reason cannot tell us whether we *should* want X. To determine whether our ends are legitimate, whether what we want is rationally sanctioned, we must use our reason in another way. *Pure* practical reason is the domain of self-legislation and morality, where we practise autonomy by testing our maxims for their validity and universalisability, and acting on the basis of duty rather than inclination, wherever these conflict. For Kant, freedom lies not just in satisfying needs, whatever they might be, but in moral

action, which entails subjecting our desires to rational control, and asking if it is possible to justify them: examining a maxim or a proposed principle of activity, we ask if it is possible that everyone will the same thing without contradiction. Would a principle on which I plan to act undermine the capacity of others to act freely? Would it involve treating others as mere means to my own ends, without respecting their intrinsic moral capacity? (Kant 1964) Answering questions like these yields categorical imperatives, moral rules that we must act on for their own sake, not for any ulterior ends. The Kantian moral standpoint is that of universality and equality, since we cannot privilege our own interests over those of others in this examination. It also takes freedom as self-legislation. We prescribe the moral law to ourselves, and do not rely on external authority to reach our conclusions. The source of value and normativity lies within us, in our rational faculties. After Kant, the question of intersubjective consensus among moral subjects (how we know and agree on rational standards) becomes thematic more explicitly in Fichte and Hegel, but it does so in response to Kantian initiatives and arguments.

The second Kantian revision of naturalistic Enlightenment subjectivity entails a reconceived idea of activity in relation to empirical causes. If desires simply compelled us to act (limited only perhaps by prudential calculation of the dangers of seeking certain things), moral activity or self-determination would have no foothold. Kant concludes that from a moral perspective we must see subjects as endowed with the capacity to distance themselves from their desires. He describes this capacity as spontaneity, the ability of the will to be determined only by causes which it itself admits, or allows to operate. We cannot scientifically prove that we have this ability, because for Kant our theoretical reason yields only knowledge of perceptible or ‘intuited’ empirical objects; but we are entitled, indeed obliged, to accept the freedom of the self as a practical principle, not as a matter of theoretical knowledge. This perspective gives us a

broader view of the freedom we enjoy in the satisfaction of desires, because we remain at liberty to choose among them. It also provides a definition of the opposite of autonomy, namely, heteronomy. This is a case where we allow ourselves to be determined by an external object or a desire, in opposition to duty. Two points need to be stressed here. First, heteronomy is the contrary of autonomy, not of spontaneity. We remain spontaneous even when we act heteronomously, because *we* are determining *ourselves* in conformity with a desire; it is not the case that the desire simply determines us, but that we *let* it. Secondly, not all need satisfaction is heteronomous; it becomes so only when it conflicts with our duty, or with what we should be doing. Happiness is not belittled, but Kant offers a more complex account of its meaning and its place within our rational activities.

So little is happiness minimised or overlooked that Kant accords it an important role within his political doctrine of right, his account of the juridical relations among free and independent subjects (Kant 1991); although for Kant happiness cannot be the foundation of ethical and political theory, it still enjoys an ample and legitimate sphere. Happiness is too subjective and variable to provide a firm basis for ethical thinking, but there must be a way of accommodating it within universal rational principles, which determine the proper scope of our satisfaction-seeking activities. As distinguished from morality, which involves full autonomy in Kant's sense of moral self-legislation, the juridical sphere, or sphere of right, regulates *external* actions so as to ensure that subjects can pursue their own ends and satisfactions without violating the conditions of free activity of others. Right concerns only the external or observable aspects of action, not its maxim or principle. In considering them as legal subjects, Kant explicitly leaves the motivations of individuals out of account. In the sphere of right, individuals determine their choices of particular goods or objects of happiness, and seek these insofar as they are mutually

compatible with others' choices. It is here that their spontaneity has free play, limited only by the necessity that others must be able to practise their own freedom simultaneously. Political prescription of these specific choices would be an infringement of spontaneity and right, and would constitute despotism (Kant 1970b, 74); the state may not legitimately determine for us the manner of seeking happiness, though it must prevent us from encroaching on the capacity of others to exert free agency themselves. In his account of right, Kant reflects on the achievements of modern political thought, presenting his own version of a social contract doctrine. But he continues to differ in important ways from Hobbes and Locke. Prudential calculation may be a sufficient ground for action *within* the sphere of right (we are not required to have moral motives when we act rightfully, but may, for example, refrain from harming others for fear of consequences); but prudence does not establish this sphere in the first place. The imperative to leave the putative state of nature and establish rightful relations in civil society is a moral one, a command of pure practical reason: "Let there be rights" is a moral decree, and not one based upon utility. It enables freedom (in the form of spontaneity) as well as satisfaction, and thus is rooted in pure practical reason, while releasing empirical practical reason to pursue its own workings, and securing its specific terrain. Secondly, the sphere of right is always situated in the larger context of morality; right does not designate the ultimate form of rational freedom, but is an important subordinate, and relatively independent, expression. The pure autonomy of moral self-determination is exercised beyond the sphere of right; morality transcends right without suppressing it, and without making it dispensable. Fichte and Hegel will retain but reconfigure and supplement these Kantian structures of practical reason, in the name of greater concreteness and historicity.

If Enlightenment materialism was unable to provide a sufficiently robust and complex account of modern freedom, also in need of revision was Enlightenment rationalism, or pre-Kantian idealism, as typified by the thought of Leibniz and Wolff. Materialism denied spontaneity; rationalism recognised it, but misconceived it. It did so in two ways: viewing spontaneity as a kind of internal necessity, and being unable to account for interaction among subjects. Leibniz rejected the external determination and naturalism of materialist thought, but instead, he makes his subjects, or monads, impervious to any outside influences whatsoever. For Leibniz, spontaneity means constant change in response to an internal imperative that belongs to the subject alone (Leibniz 1991, §10, §11). It is not freedom of choice, as in Kant, but is a necessary revelation of an inner content. It is like the execution of an internal programme, and each programme is unique. The activity of these monads can be explained only from their own intrinsic properties. This is the meaning of Leibniz' claim that monads are 'windowless' (Leibniz 1991, §7). As Kant saw, the problem of unity among such purely self-propelled and non-interactive beings becomes insoluble. Leibniz's proposal, the principle of pre-established harmony (i.e. only those monads co-exist whose independent effects are mutually compatible), is to Kant a dogmatic, indemonstrable hypothesis. He argues that unity implies more than the co-existence of entirely independent atoms, but designates a network of connections produced through interaction and mutual causality (Kant 1999, A 267-68, 275; B 322-34). Because he has redefined spontaneity in a less restrictive way, Kant can also explain, through his logical category of relation, how an internal property of one subject can not only derive from inner motives, but can also arise from a causal force exerted by another, and received and internalised by the first. Kant designates this mutual exchange as reciprocity. Thus we no longer have windowless monads, but interacting individuals open to each other's influences. Unlike natural

objects, however, these individuals are not merely passive recipients of external force, but active appropriators and shapers of these influences. The spontaneity of subjects is not violated by their relations to others, but is enriched with new materials to work upon; and new properties emerge in the interaction which would not be present on the basis of intrinsic qualities alone. The system of relations is the totality of these mutual influences and responses, and is not grounded in a transcendent or pre-figured harmony. Kant applies this conclusion in describing his sphere of right as a system of mutual limitation (Moggach 2000), but it is, once again, Fichte and Hegel who work out the implications of this idea for a fuller theory of intersubjectivity, a mutual causality among subjects compatible with their spontaneity and freedom. This theory distinguishes between natural causes, and causes from freedom, or influence, where automatic reaction is replaced by conscious and reasoned response. In the domain of practical reason, this response is not necessitated but invited, or elicited, by the action of the other subject; and the subject receiving the elicitation is left free to internalise the call and respond to it in its own way (Fichte 1966, §3-§4). On this idea, individuals are not only limits on one another's freedom, but, in the right kinds of ethical relationships, instruct one another in its meaning and use. This mutual education in freedom is the meaning of Hegel's idea of ethical life, anticipated by Fichte and Schiller.

The inadequacies of Enlightenment rationalism are further exemplified in the political thought of Leibniz's disciple, Christian Wolff (Stipperger1984; Schneewind 1998, 432-44). Wolff's ethics is based on an idea of a fixed human nature and the conditions of its material and intellectual thriving; he thus inflects Leibniz's thought in an Aristotelian direction. Left to its own devices, individual spontaneity has inadequate resources to discover and achieve its own happiness and perfection. Without stable organisational forms, individuals are incapable of

reliably orienting their actions toward the betterment of themselves and others (Wolff 1969, §186-§189, §972; Wolff 1988, 88-89). Thus individuals are moved to leave the state of nature, where relations with others are not necessarily marked by conflict and danger, as Hobbes had believed, but where personal abilities cannot be properly developed. Wolff 's civil society is thus an early version of an interventionist welfare state, whose objective is to guarantee 'perfection' or steady improvement in all areas of life, including decent living conditions, education, housing, and preservation of the environment (water, forests, etc.). This is the core of Wolff's defence of enlightened absolutism, which is to enact this programme. The defect of Wolff's thinking for Kant is twofold: it seeks to prescribe to individuals politically how to seek their own well-being, thus violating their fundamental right of spontaneity; and it places happiness rather than autonomy at the heart of moral theory. Kant's own legal thought is an attempt to counter both of these defects, as well as those of Enlightenment materialism. Fichte and Hegel pursue the analysis of freedom and interaction, on the basis of Kant's founding insights.

Further Developments in Thinking Freedom: The Will

One of the most important contributions of German idealism to political philosophy is its analysis of the dialectic of the will as the exercise of freedom (cf. Quante 2004b). Building on Kant, Hegel distinguishes three aspects of the will, and studies the ways in which these aspects interact in various forms of social relations. In theoretical reason or knowledge, Kant had identified self-consciousness, or what he called the 'transcendental unity of apperception', as a potential (if not always fully explicit) self-reference which linked experiences, discrete in time, to a single source, to a self who holds the experiences together as its own; but Kant had left this principle entirely formal or further unspecified, on the grounds that the unifying activities of the

self exceeded the bounds of objective knowledge. Hegel, following Fichte, asks what is involved in the activity of the self, not just in cognitive experience, but in action. His *Science of Logic* (Hegel 1969a) is a systematic attempt to deduce the categories appropriate to subjective willing and action, as well as objective cognition. From his logic, Hegel contends that the will possesses the dimensions of universality, particularity, and individuality. The universality of the will has two facets, universality of form and of content (or more strictly, not content itself, but openness to, or the possibility of, content, as well as the standards to which content must conform). It is analogous to the first principle of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, I=I, or the pure self (Fichte 1970, 93-102).[3] Formally, the universality of the will is its independence, its ability to abstract or withdraw from any given fact about itself or its world into the pure domain of self-consciousness, its sense of being an "I" (Hegel 1991, §5). As a question of practical reason, Kant had referred to this ability as spontaneity, and as negative freedom, the capacity of the will to be undetermined by any cause that it does not itself admit;[4] and Hegel makes this the starting point of his own idea of freedom in the *Philosophy of Right*. This claim is intended, again, not to deny the world, but to show that we can resist being submerged in it: we can relate to the world freely precisely by virtue of this initial dissociative capacity.

This negative power is a necessary component of freedom, but we must resist three incorrect implications that have been drawn historically on its basis. One of these is the view of the ancient Stoics, for whom freedom is entirely subjective or internal. Reflecting on the vicissitudes of life in the Roman Empire, the Stoic teacher Epictetus had claimed that we were free and independent even on the torturer's rack, or in the status of slavery, provided only that

[3] Analogous but not identical: see Sedgwick 2000, 5-13.
[4] This is distinct from negative freedom as now commonly understood, e.g. by Isaiah Berlin (1969, 121-23), who sees it simply as non-interference, but without asking whether or not one's ends are freely self-given, or determined by an external cause.

we maintained control of our will. To this doctrine, Hegel opposes his own conception of the need to externalise and experience freedom in the world and in our relationships to others: Epictetus' is the slave's view of freedom, before the slaves themselves learn to surmount this standpoint by acquiring new capacities through their labour. The second incorrect application of the principle of universality Hegel attributes to his Romantic contemporaries like Novalis and Schleiermacher. This is the idea of the 'beautiful soul,' reluctant to sully its inner purity by engagement with raw materiality, and so incapable of action (Hegel 1967, 658-66). The third unacceptable implication is one that Hegel attributes to the Jacobins during the French Revolution, in what he calls the fury of destruction based on a one-sided idea of the formal universality of the will: insofar as no external fact reflects the will in its purity, these external facts are to be violently annulled (Hegel 1991, §5). Hegel's own account of the externalisation of reason will require a different attitude toward objectivity, seeking not simply to negate, but to promote what is rational within it.

The second facet of the universality of the will refers to its ability to take up a content and make it its own. Hegel thematises this capacity not so much in his introductory discussion of the will, but in the section of the *Philosophy of Right* devoted to morality (Hegel 1991, §105-§140; Quante 2004a). We have not yet reached the level of any actual content itself, which requires the further moments of particularity and individuality, but now we describe rather the will's ability to discriminate and to absorb, and not simply to abstract. Here the universality of the will becomes more concrete, leading (through the intricate developments of the *Philosophy of Right*), to the emergence of shared standards of willing. This is Hegel's version of the Kantian categorical imperative, and he follows it through types of interaction of growing complexity, in the domains of abstract right (property and contract, where we situate our will in external

objects, and exchange them); morality (where we develop principles for judging the kinds of things we may desire for our welfare and for the good); and what he calls ethical life, culminating in our political roles as citizens of the modern state. Each is a development of universality as endowed with a different kind of content. Hegel thinks that Kant's error here is to consider the standards of willing to be absolutely timeless, whereas they are inscribed in a developmental history of reason; and Kant fails to complete inward morality with the outward practices, institutions, and effects of freedom in ethical life, where autonomy becomes concrete.

After universality in these two senses, we come to the second moment or dimension of the will, its particularity (Hegel 1991, §6). Analogous to Fichte's second principle, the admission of otherness or that which stands opposed to pure self-consciousness (Fichte 1970, 102-05), this refers the empirical content of the willing consciousness, the material that is simply present as possible sources of willing, though not yet actively willed: the drives, the tastes and desires, the historically framed 'identity' of subjects prior to their critically reflecting on it, and assenting to act on it. These are provided by the specific concrete experiences that we happen to have, and form the basis of our possible actions; while these experiences are contingent or random in their distribution among subjects, they also tend to cluster in certain configurations, because at any specific time certain understandings of self and world are available (conceptual schemes, as the literature puts it), which enable some kinds of experience and preclude others. In reflecting on this dimension, the historical character of willing becomes apparent: the universality of the will is not absolute, but is always in relation to some given range of possible objects. That is, we cannot will just anything, independently of our time and its specific features, which determine the historical horizons for possible content; thus, Hegel says, one cannot overleap one's time in thought, or in action. Modern understandings of freedom were not available to the ancients,

despite anticipations in Socrates, etc. This is not, however, to rule out paradigm shifts or world-historic change, or to tie individuals inevitably to the reproduction of fixed forms of interaction, as we will see. Hegel also warns against an incorrect implication of this view of particularity: because, as we learned from the perspective of universality, we can abstract from our particularity and judge it, it would be a violation of our autonomy to take these merely given facts as authoritative, or as directive of our actions without reflection and rational justification.[5] Our particularity circumscribes us, but does not compel us to act in certain ways. We are not determined by particularity, though we may allow it to determine us; if we do so, we act heteronomously, under the influence of an alien cause (no less alien because it might happen to be a facet of our—uncriticised or merely given— psychological makeup). This is the defect of Hobbes, and much of subsequent liberalism: to view freedom as the absence of obstacles between subjects and the objects of their desire, but without asking in light of what standards these desires are themselves justified. Thus Hobbesian freedom succumbs to the critique of heteronomy; the will colludes in its determination by some empirical object, without submitting this process to critique. While Hobbes is prepared to admit one level of criticism of our desires, that of rational consistency or rational choice, testing that we do not simultaneously will contradictory ends or ends that jeopardise our survival, this test falls far short of the Kantian demand for autonomy in its more rigorous sense, namely that we will in accord with universal standards that we prescribe to ourselves.[6]

The third dimension of the will, its individuality, refers to the moment of decision, the

5 Contemporary communitarians (Macintyre 1981, 1984, 2007) tend to defend particularistic conceptions of group identities, and to tie individuals tightly and uncritically to these scripts. Hegel's account should not be identified with these.

6 Strictly, Kantian rigorism requires that in moral action we will not only *in accord with* duty, but also exclusively *from the motive of* duty. It is possible to act in conformity with duty, but for sentimental or self-regarding reasons. Action so motivated would not count for Kant as truly autonomous. Hegel will relax this standard.

conscious investment of the will in some particular, and the exclusion of other possibilities (Hegel 1991, §7). This is analogous to Fichte's third principle, the active and voluntary relation between self-consciousness and the world (Fichte 1970, 105-06). In Hegel's sense, individuality describes a syllogistic movement: the universal descends from its self-containment into a particular form, while the particular ascends into the domain of thought. The universal acquires substance and concreteness by selecting and representing itself in a particular content, which thereby ceases to be merely given, and is 'posited' or consciously accepted. It strips off its contingent nature to become the expression of a thought and a decision. Individuality, as the conclusion of the syllogism of the will, contains these two intersecting movements, and unites them in a result, a willed subjective end that is transposed through activity into objective being. In this respect Hegel notes and criticises an additional incorrect assumption about freedom, according to which it consists in indeterminacy, or simply having options. On this view, we are freer *before* we decide to commit to some end or action; Hegel calls this a typical illusion of youth (Hegel 1991, §207). Rather, for him, it is in the resolution, the chosen self-limitation (and exertion within these limits—our practical ends are not mere yearnings), that rational freedom and individuality consist. Hegel is also severely critical of a further perversion of individuality, the stance of modern irony which he attributes to other figures among his contemporary Romantics, such as Friedrich Schlegel (Hegel 1991, §140). This attitude involves for Hegel a mere toying with objectivity, a detachment from one's ends and from the labour of realising them; here the self finds that it cannot recognise itself in its deed, because the self is an infinite creative power, and the deed is always a limitation. Hegel attributes this view, among other sources, to a serious misreading of Fichte. He links irony to alienation, and offers in its place his own account of the realisation of reason, as reconciling subjectivity and objectivity.[7]

7 Thus Hegel's thought should not be confused with Romanticism, as it is in Larmore 1987, 99-

Freedom, History, Modernity

History for German idealism is the expression of practical reason. For Kant the progressive character of history as the realisation of reason is a moral postulate or regulative principle: by acting on the assumption that the objective world can be refashioned under the command of reason, we help to bring about this result, though we cannot affirm it a scientific fact. Here is one important divergence between Kant and Hegel. For the latter, the logic of history is open to retrospective philosophical reconstruction, focusing on the shifting patterns of relations among subjects and their interventions in the objective world, guided by certain understandings of freedom. The *Phenomenology* provides a history of practical reason, of diverse 'shapes of consciousness', including images of self and world (Henrich 2003, 22-23; Harris 1997). Though willing is circumscribed by the available particularity or content, the possibility of transition to new ways of seeing and doing lies in the contradictory character of the conceptual schemes with which subjects operate. They try to enact a certain view of themselves and their world, as sanctioned by dominant norms, and they find in crucial respects that they systematically fail (Pinkard 1996). These failures lead to a reformulation of the basic categories, and to new kinds of self-understandings, upon which basis new social arrangements eventually arise. Hegel's *Phenomenology* offers an account of these schemes, their internal insufficiencies, and their sequence. Older readings of Hegel saw this as a kind of metaphysical, cosmic process undertaken by a supramundane spirit, using human beings for its own ends, in order to achieve

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107. It might also be mentioned here that post-modernism, a contemporary variant of scepticism, seeks to undermine the claims of individual autonomy and rationality, in ways strikingly similar to romantic irony. Hegel criticises the ironic detachment of subjects from their own ends as a one-sided idea of freedom. To such a free-floating and inconsistent subjectivity Hegel, following Fichte, opposes his own theory of intersubjective ethical life. See Reid 2007, 170-171.

its own self-consciousness, but more recent research sees Hegel as making more modest and immanent claims about the progress and trials of human self-consciousness (Deligiorgi 2006). The basic problem that requires resolution is set by the dominant contradiction or 'determinate negation' within the conceptual scheme; but how the problem will be solved is not predetermined. The solution remains an act of creative freedom (Bourgeois 1992).

As a result of the dialectic of the will, personality is not fixed, but is an achievement, an act of freedom, even if not of absolute freedom, since it is always conditioned by the particular possibilities of choice. Hegel defines personality as the ability to determine for oneself one's own ends and attributes, to transform given particularity into conscious individuality through reflective will (Hegel 1969b, esp. §412-§417). Historical periods can be characterised, among other ways, by the prevalent kinds of personality within them, as manifestations of certain broadly shared understandings of freedom. In Hegel's historical account of the forms of personality, an especially important distinction is that between ancients and moderns (though in his *Phenomenology* Hegel traces many intermediate forms, such as the unhappy consciousness of the mediaeval world, thrust into the misery of earthly life but yearning for its heavenly, spiritual home). Classical Greek doctrines of virtue aim to elicit what Hegel calls the beautiful individual (Hegel 1956, 239-53), whose beauty consists in manifesting those values or excellences whereby the self is seamlessly integrated into the communal substance of the *polis*. Self and world achieve an unparalleled harmony that is represented in classical art and ethics. The dominant conceptions of antiquity portray the members of the community as bearers of a shared substance of values; unlike modern individuals as Hobbes depicts them, beautiful individuals do not erect an artificial community to further their own private ends, but, as Aristotle puts it, they are parts of a whole that precedes and defines them. Their unity, however, is incompatible with a robust sense of

personal spontaneity and autonomy; they do not possess an autonomous moral conscience, a critical and independent reflection on prevailing political norms. The community as a whole is relatively undifferentiated (Hegel 1991, §185): in comparison with modern society, the division of labour is rudimentary, and the economy, though figuring among the preconditions for political life, has not yet crystallised out from the political order as a separate domain of activity. The *polis* community allows little scope for individual interests and judgements about the good; the condemnation of Socrates is illustrative of these defects.

The constricted unity of the polis could not sustain itself in the face of its limitations,[8] and came to be replaced by other forms of social life, such as Roman legalism, and mediaeval hierarchies. Though Hegel was not indifferent to the appeal of Greece,[9] he credits modernity with discovering what he calls the free and infinite personality (Hegel 1991, p. 20-21), which is capable of a far more complex and differentiated unity. For Hegel, modernity offers both an unprecedented scope for individual spontaneity and autonomy, and broader prospects of rational interaction. The freedom of the modern personality consists, first, in the unfolding of particularity and the recognition of its rights, both as the right of subjective conscience and the adjudication of public norms, and as the right to seek material satisfaction across a growing range of needs. These rights are much broader than those enjoyed in earlier social forms. Secondly, its freedom consists in its universality, its participation in rational institutions and forms of social life, in which it experiences and affirms its own autonomy (Neuhouser 2000). Because it can admit the rights of subjective freedom, and represent universal claims to self-determination, the modern state as it emerges from the crucible of the French Revolution demonstrates a greater degree of rationality than previous political forms like the *polis*,

8 Cf. Hegel 1967, 491-99 on Antigone.
9 For the development of his views on this subject, Riedel 1984.

mediaeval hierarchies of privilege, and early modern absolutisms. The infinity that Hegel attributes to the modern personality is that of being self-reflexive, or aware of its own achievements, and of expressing this consciousness in its relations to other subjects. This is the opposite of ironic subjectivity, because it recognises and affirms itself in its deeds. In modern ethical life, if properly understood and organised, freedom and community are not opposed, but complementary: the expansive movement of particularity is counterbalanced by the recursive movement to unity, or membership in a rationally ordered community. The figure of the free and infinite personality holds both these movements in dynamic tension.

Hegel's theory is not simply an endorsement of the liberal order, but a critical or alternative modernism (see Kolb 1986). If modernity makes possible new understandings and practices of freedom, it can also appear as a culture of alienation or fragmentation (Hegel 1964, 88, 90-91), an assertion of unbridled particularity, which undermines the potential for rational autonomy and community. As we have seen in our discussion of the will and its dimensions, modern freedom can be understood one-sidedly, as pure particularity or individual self-assertion; this is the defect of liberalism (Hegel 1956, 452). In this version, the interests released by modern subjectivity remain locked in stubborn opposition; the recursive movement toward unity is blocked. Schiller (1967) had recognised this problem in his distinction between the dynamic and aesthetic states, the former based on unyielding private interest, the latter on self-transformation and mutual accommodation. Hegel takes up and elaborates this critique of alienated and alienating modernisms. Hobbes, for example, reduces individuals to the status of obstacles or means to each other's purposes, and defines freedom as felicity, the ability to secure the objects of one's desire. The state thus appears to Hobbes as the result of a social contract; it is an effect of individual decisions, providing the instrumental context for a more secure pursuit of

private ends. For the German idealists, such an account fails on the grounds of spontaneity, as it takes the will to be determined by the objects of its desire; and it fails as autonomy, because it provides no universal standards (only hypothetical or prudential ones) by which the ends of activity can be assessed.

When he considers it as a culture of fragmented ethical life, Hegel's vision of modernity is that of a period troubled by deep contradictions between universality and particularity, between emancipatory possibilities and the deviant forms in which these possibilities find expression, whether in liberal particularism or romantic subjectivism. Here the free and infinite personality describes less a reality than an incompletely achieved ideal; less a constitutive principle of modernity than a regulative one, providing normative standards in light of which we should act, or to which we should aspire. So Hegel's progressive or 'leftist' followers understood him, reinvigorating the Kantian elements of his thought which have also been stressed by current research (Moggach 2006). If the real is rational, it is so in terms of its basic tendencies, and not because reason has been fully or unproblematically realised. History has not ended, but modern individuals and ethical communities are equipped with rational insights whereby they can, if they choose, promote what is most valuable in it; or they can succumb to the force of alienation.

These tensions are incorporated into Hegel's affirmative conception of modern ethical life itself. Fundamental to this conception is the distinction between state and civil society, which Hegel, adopting the findings of political economy from Smith to Ricardo, theorises in the *Philosophy of Right*. Civil society is redefined as the realm of market transactions, while the state stands outside it, not only as its guardian, but as a higher ethical domain, enabling a distinct kind of freedom as citizenship, and a more conscious universality as membership in a rationally ordered community (Riedel 1984). Elaborating Kantian practical reason, Hegel seeks to

accommodate both the spontaneity and the autonomy of the will, and to designate an institutional sphere where each capacity exercises a primary role. He recognises the market as a legitimate expression of particularity: of modern juridical right, of the modern division of labour, and of material satisfactions. To this extent the market realises the claims to spontaneity which Kant had also defended. Beyond the market lies the state, the realm where fuller and more concrete autonomy can be practised.[10] But the relation between these spheres remains a difficult one. Though each has a valid range of application, it is important not to confuse the economic with the political, or to evacuate citizenship in favour of consumerism. While the figure of the free and infinite personality presents the conflict as pacified, the two identities inscribed in modern conceptual schemes, as citizen and as member of civil-economic society, can come into sharp opposition.

Viewing property as an important expression of the will and an objectification of freedom, Hegel also sees that modern civil society or the market contains negations, which limit its full rationality, or its adequacy to the concept of freedom: exclusions from satisfaction and subjective right based upon poverty, growing polarisation between rich and poor, and endemic tendencies toward overproduction and crisis (Hegel 1991, §241-§248; Harris 1983; Bodei 1975; Rose 1981, 48ff., 80). Though recognising the intractability of these problems, and refusing on principled grounds to anticipate the future, whose course is open to free intervention, Hegel seeks to describe mediating institutions whereby the market might be contained, but not suppressed, so that its logic does not pervade and dominate the political sphere, and so that its dissolving effects can be mitigated. Though it too can be misconstrued as that of mere taxpayer or consumer of government services (on a market model of the state), the status of citizenship

10 Recent research [Franco (1999), Neuhouser (2000), Patten (2000), Wood (1990)] stresses this emancipatory dimension of Hegel, against older views (Popper 1945) which alleged his idolatry of the state, or authoritarianism.

itself offers some resources for these tasks. Through political participation, individuals are able to orient themselves toward collective projects and general interests, steer economic processes toward common ends (rather then being simply determined by market forces), and subject their own private understandings to public assessment and critique. Thus they can confirm and enact their autonomy as citizens, not only as consumers or bearers of private rights; and they can validate the ideal of reflexive unity. After Hegel, members of his school like Eduard Gans thought they saw in the dynamics of civil society and in monopolies of private power the determinate negation of the present, the decisive contradiction that had to be solved if further progress toward freedom and more rational forms of social life were to be attained (Waszek 2006). The proper relations between the state and the economy are not yet entirely transparent in the conceptual schemes of modernity.

Conclusion

German idealism from Kant to Hegel proposes new ways of understanding the modern world and the capacities of modern subjects, while remaining attentive to the conflicts and contradictions that beset this world. In advocating mature and reflexive self-awareness, the Kantian tradition also warns against dogmatic or uncritical clinging to the arguments and assessments of its founders; it promotes autonomous thinking and ethical engagement. Without succumbing to passivity and resignation, it is possible to concur with Hegel that philosophy cannot predict or prescribe the path of the future; this is the meaning of his famous image of the owl of Minerva, taking wing at dusk. Philosophy can, however, examine the past, offering subjects developmental perspectives on their world; and it can analyse contradictions at the heart of current practices. It can also act as an elicitation, inviting an ongoing and participatory

interrogation into the normative validity of modern institutions, their emancipatory claims, and their successes and failures. Based on a profound analysis of the spontaneity and autonomy of human action, German idealism continues to make valuable contributions to these assessments. This idealism is better regarded not as a closed edifice, but as a beacon, illuminating both the historical becoming of freedom, and the obstacles that stand in its way.*

* The author acknowledges the generous support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and of a Canada Council Killam Research Fellowship.

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