

A REAPPROPRIATION OF HEGEL: IS *SITTlichkeit* ALL IT'S CRACKED UP TO BE?

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All too often, Hegel is falsely characterized. For some, he is precisely what his philosophical adversary Arthur Schopenhauer said: a “shallow, witless charlatan” whose “wretched sophisms” and “senseless twaddle of proofs” are the pinnacle of “sham philosophy.”¹ For others, he is the predecessor to totalitarianism, the forerunner of German fascism, who was able to not only anticipate, but justify state oppression of critics and the underprivileged.² Yet despite these charges, Georg F. W. Hegel is still taken seriously by academia today; his great texts, still studied and discussed, frequently enter into dialogue with the deliberations over state-building today. Crucial to understanding both his perplexity and his appeal is the political philosophy he articulates in his 1821 work *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, which attempts to lay the groundwork for a conception of an ethical life that allows people within the State to find freedom and liberation in a way that avoids hindering others, and elevates peoples’ status in an objective, rational way. In

¹ Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*. Translator and Editor: (E. F. J. Payne). New York, New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1969, 249, 303, 442.

² Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Translator: (Nisbet, H.B.). Editor: (Wood, Allen W). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991, ix.

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this paper, I will examine Hegel's political thought in an effort to vindicate him from false accusations and provide a better frame for engagement with his work.

Rooted in an incomplete understanding and of his formulation of the state, the charge that Hegel's political thought is totalitarian is false; nevertheless, as his words may strike contemporary readers as perplexing — or outright alarming — an exploration of his thought is necessary to vindicate him. In his 1821 work, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel asserts the following:

Similarly, in the *state*, as the *objectivity* of the concept of reason, *legal responsibility* [*die gerichtliche Zurechnung*] must not stop at what the individual considers to be in conformity with his reason or otherwise, or at his subjective insight into rightness or wrongness, good or evil, or at what he may require in order to satisfy his conviction.³

For Hegel, since the state is objective form of the concept of reason, the legal responsibility it has to its citizens is not contingent on what certain individuals within society see as reasonable. If the state truly is reason made manifest, those who object to the rational laws set forth by the state are acting irrationally. To some, this model appears to imply that social critics and reformers are irrational and should be regarded as irrelevant, as they are failing to live up to moral living.

A challenging question can be raised here: if critics of the state are failing to live up to proper moral living, what should we make of reformers like Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi? On this model, they seem to be an obstacle to society's well-being. Should we think Hegel is opposed to them? Or, is he able to countenance reformers' immanent critique of the state they inhabit? In this paper, I will

³ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 159.

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argue that Hegel can support social critiques and that *Sittlichkeit* — his conception of ethical life — actually *requires* social reformers to promote moral progress and uphold the welfare of society. Ideally, I will offer a way to salvage Hegel's thought from being falsely appropriated by totalitarian thinkers, and demonstrate how Hegel is more welcoming to the idea of social reform as a rational action — and moral duty — than the purely duty-based slavishness to the state with which he is often associated.

I shall advance my argument in steps. First, I shall examine what Hegel's view *appears* to be and explain the basic concepts necessary to understanding his political philosophy with regards to state building and social responsibility. In particular, this section will show how Hegel resolves concepts that typically seem in tension with one another, revealing them to be complementary, rather than antithetical. Next, I will propose the endeavors and critiques of great moral exemplars as challenges to framing Hegel as a social justice advocate. Following that, I shall demonstrate how Hegel actually does not disregard social reformers as irrational, irrelevant beings, but instead requires them for developing the state to its full potential. Penultimately, I shall consider objections to my defense of Hegel. Finally, I shall respond to those objections and conclude that people who hold social reformers in high esteem can take Hegel and *Sittlichkeit* seriously, and regard his political thought as a route to objective freedom that supports social justice reforms.

Hegel's *apparent* view in *Philosophy of Right* is that dissidents and social reformers are irrational beings who are not at home in their communities because they do not act in accordance with the standards of their state. Vindicating Hegel of this charge — and making sense of his thought in general — requires a proper examination of what he means by *Sittlichkeit*. *Sittlichkeit* is essentially the idea that each respective person is who he/she is only because of the society that created him/her and which preserves and fosters his/her

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identity.⁴ Hegel posits that all people are not purely individual, autonomous beings.⁵ Man is a political animal; always situated in a community, our identities are constituted by the state we are born into.⁶ Each state has history and tradition behind it; the cultural aspects and societal norms of our society shape its people as they develop.⁷ As Hegel puts it, “Since the determinations of ethics constitute the concept of freedom, they are the substantiality or universal essence of individuals, who are related to them merely as accidents. Whether the individual exists or not is a matter of indifference to objective ethical life.”⁸ Consequently, Hegel argues that we find individual contentment and freedom when we conform to societal standards.⁹

Since the state we are born into is what gives us our identity, Hegel proposes that we are forever *indebted* to the state; accordingly, the state deserves some gratitude.¹⁰ By fulfilling our obligations, both to our fellow-citizens and the state that protects us, we manifest two of life’s most important tasks: building identity through others and giving meaning to our existence. “All these substantial determinations,” Hegel writes, “are duties which are binding on the will of the individual, as subjective and inherently undetermined — or

⁴ Rose, David. *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right; A Reader’s Guide*. (London, UK: Continuum International Publishing Group., 2007), 109.

⁵ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 159.

⁶ Westphal, Merold. *History and Truth in Hegel’s Phenomenology, Third Edition*. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press., 1979, 1990, 1998), 139.

⁷ Staehler, Tanja. “The Possibility of a Phenomenology of Cultural Worlds in Hegel and Husserl.” *Hegel Bulletin*, 38/1 (2017), 88.

⁸ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 190.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Schmidt, Dennis J. “The Monstrous, Catastrophe, and Ethical Life: Hegel, Heidegger and Antigone.” *Philosophy Today*, Volume 59, Issue 1 (2015), 71.

determined in a particular way — is distinct from them and *consequently stands in a relationship to them* as his own substantial being.”¹¹ Without duties to fulfill, without rational norms to uphold, without others to serve and help, people stand not only unfulfilled, but *undetermined*; one’s being is wrapped up in others who give it meaning, and it is through service that we build relationships and cultivate purpose. Because we *owe* the state payment for it granting us life and the ability to shape our identity, we must necessarily conform with its norms.¹² Since the norms that have been actualized are rational (for they are actual), for a person in a state not to conform with that society’s standards is to *act irrationally*.¹³

For Hegel, complete freedom is found by actualizing one’s individuality through the other, which is in turn actualized by fulfilling the objective standards posited by the rational state which constitutes him/her.¹⁴ “The *right of individuals* to their *subjective determination to freedom*,” he writes, “is fulfilled insofar as they belong to ethical actuality.”¹⁵ On this understanding, freedom is not the libertarian ability to do as one pleases: to be objective, freedom and independence must have rational meaning. Hegel points out that if you act irrationally or egotistically, you are not free — you are *chained*, either to the shadow cast by ignorance that veils your mind, the selfish passions of your heart, or the appetitive desires of your gut.¹⁶ For instance, if you choose to smoke cigarettes but then become addicted, you are not actually free to choose if you want to smoke them —

¹¹ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 191).

¹² De Nys, Martin J. “The Owl of Minerva: quarterly journal of the Hegel Society of America.” 43: 1-2 (2011-2012), 139.

¹³ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 196.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁶ Houlgate, Stephen. “Right and Trust in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*.” *Hegel Bulletin*, 37/1, *The Hegel Society of Great Britain*. (2017). 104.

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you are simply fettered to the nicotine, and must satisfy your body's chemical cravings.

Yet bodily desires are not the only ways individual freedom is lost to subjectivity: decisions that seem rational but are bound up with arbitrary whims also result in bondage. For example, people who conform to social norms to be accepted are arbitrarily dependent on others for self-worth; they miss the mark of objective social independence. Thus, following arbitrary subjective standards to actualize your interests is actually *denying* your individuality, and by extension, your *freedom*. The true way to actualize your freedom and act independently is to act in accordance with rational standards that have been actualized by the rational state which constitutes you. Although to some duty appears to restrict our natural desires, Hegel concludes that "in duty the individual finds his liberation . . . from mere natural impulse . . . In duty the individual acquires his substantive freedom."¹⁷

As pointed out by the scholar Tanja Staehler, the world we are born into predates us and acts as a "meaningful context...determined by senses, atmospheres, and ideals."¹⁸ Illustrating this fact, British philosopher F. H. Bradley observes that as a child grows up in the world, he does not think of himself as a separate entity; he develops with the world around him, and his identity matures as develops through his friendships, relationships, interests, and experiences.¹⁹ The language he learns to communicate with his community has been passed down by generations of ancestors, and the definitions express the same sentiments and ideas that his ancestors posited. His/her soul feels emotion when the symbols of his/her culture prompt it. Society thus makes its members feel that their identity is determined by

¹⁷ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 192.

¹⁸ Staehler, Tanja. "The Possibility of a Phenomenology of Cultural Worlds in Hegel and Husserl," 93.

¹⁹ Singer, Peter. *Hegel: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1983), 47.

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serving in that community. Noted scholar Peter Singer provides a helpful example of what the state and society at large thus require of its members. A member of a community is like a body's limbs: the limbs act in accordance with what the brain commands. The brain is responding to the heart which sustains it. Arms and legs do not have brains in themselves and cannot decide for themselves what they desire. The limbs' serve the stomach in various ways, and in turn the stomach keeps the heart pumping and brain rationalizing.²⁰

Since it is the state we are born into that constitutes our identity and existence, the standards and laws of the state are the only ways we can truly express our individuality. If the state is rational, we can only be rational beings if we act in accordance with the standards of the state. Thus, the laws of the state are actually a form of freedom. We would not be who we are without the spirit of the rational state; accordingly, to act contrary to that is to act *erroneously* or *subjectively*. As Hegel articulates,

The fact that the ethical sphere is the *system* of these determinations of the Idea constitutes its *rationality*. In this way, the ethical sphere is freedom...whose moments...govern the lives of individuals. In these individuals — who are accidental to them — these powers have their representation [*Vorstellung*], phenomenal shape [*erscheinende Gestalt*], and actuality.²¹

Sittlichkeit describes how a citizen can know his/her duties because social existence constitutes and determines right behavior.²² These duties will be rational when they are “actual” and not merely “abstract.” Effectively, one can only

²⁰ Singer, Peter, *Hegel: A Very Short Introduction*, 48.

²¹ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 190.

²² *Ibid*, 195.

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act freely when he/she is totally sure he/she is acting rationally: in other words, acting in accordance with the values set by the rational state.²³ For Hegel, “Ethical life is the Idea of Freedom as the living good which has its knowledge and volition in self-consciousness, and its actuality through self-conscious action.”²⁴ The individual’s sureness demands justification by the rational state, which in turn requires the subjective will of the individual to be in tune with it. Thus, the rational state needs to provide objective freedom that the self-conscious subject can understand what is right and voluntarily approve of it.²⁵ Hegel sees individual satisfaction and freedom unified when they conform to the “social ethos of an organic community.”²⁶

However, if going against the standards set by the rational state or criticizing the ruling regime is acting irrationally, how are we to make sense of social critics and reformers through a Hegelian lens? Dissidents like Aleksander Solzhenitsyn and activists like Rev. King seem problematic, nay, even an *obstacle* on Hegel’s model. To extend Singer’s analogy, it seems that humanitarian advocates like Mahatma Gandhi and Frederick Douglass are actually biting the hand that feeds them by acting in their own self-interest. In the same vein, a number of states throughout history have clearly suppressed freedom on grounds they claimed to be “rational.” The United States denied blacks the right to vote in 1960 in “the interest of the nation as a whole.”²⁷ The Soviet Union denied people basic health care and living necessities “in the

²³ Pinkard, Terry. *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 221.

²⁴ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 189.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 198.

²⁶ Singer, Peter, *Hegel: A Very Short Introduction*, 45.

²⁷ Greenberg, *Is History Being Too Kind to George H. W. Bush?*, 1.

interest of the community.”²⁸ None of these significant discriminatory legislative acts executed by states — all executed *in the name of* the common good — help Hegel’s case. If we approach the historical reality with Hegel’s description of the rational state, it seems easy to justify actions taken by governments that actually deny human dignity.

Given such events, it is no wonder that Rev. King said in his *I Have A Dream* speech, “One hundred years later the life of the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land...there will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights.”²⁹ In this speech, King not only admits that his people do not feel “at home” in their society, but advocates for political criticism for an indefinite time period. But might Hegel view these lines as damning evidence of Rev. King obstructing the strength of the rational state?

Hegel lays out the foundations for the possibility of immanent critique in the requirements he sets for political structures to be rational. Political structures are only rational when they allow for three things: individuals must be able to pursue their interests, feel at home within their communities, and freely express their rational existence. Additionally, a rational state must possess certain qualities: it must have laws and institutions that secure basic life necessities, and its subjects must be able to voluntarily support the laws and understand the reasoning behind them.³⁰

For a state to be rational, it must have laws that allow individuals to pursue their interests.³¹ Recall Singer's original body analogy. One’s legs may not guide his/her brain, but both

²⁸ Mahoney, Daniel J. *Aleksander Solzhenitsyn: The Ascent from Ideology*. (Oxford, England:v Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 49.

²⁹ King, Martin L., Jr. "I Have a Dream." Speech. (Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D. C. 28 Aug. 1963), 1-2.

³⁰ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 221.

³¹ *Ibid*, 77.

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need each other. Without the brain, the legs will die off, for they will have no direction, and thus no function to perform. In a hostile environment, without legs, the brain could die. The brain does not simply ignore the pain its nervous system feels when a leg is injured; rather, the pain signals the brain that something must be done to protect the leg from danger.³² It is a reciprocal relationship.

Building off that analogy, I contend that the government actually needs to hear the voices of certain reformers because they can warn the government of impending danger, and allow the government to advance forward in society. Without the peaceful protests of Rev. King, America may not have benefited from African-American brain trusts like the economist Thomas Sowell, the physicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson, and the Associate Justice Thurgood Marshall. Additionally, such brain trusts might want to support the U.S. because, in some ways, it made possible their successes: by providing quality educational access, developing their identities through relationships they had, and giving them meaning through virtuous service, the country, for all its faults, ultimately allowed them to flourish. Following that, if society does not have laws in place that allow for individuals to freely pursue their interests without hindrance, it will not progress, as it will not meet the output standards it is capable of. By increasing suffrage universally, more groups are able to express their interests, which should eventually allow the groups to fulfill duties and make contributions to the state at maximum capacity.

Thus, we can now see that all the requirements Hegel sets forth for a state to be rational actually *complement* each other: Hegel is not concerned with freedom to do as one arbitrarily chooses; he is concerned with freedom to act rationally in a way that actualizes your freedom as an

³² Singer, Peter, *Hegel: A Very Short Introduction*, 46.

individual.³³ Subjects in a state must be able to pursue the interests that are rational to have so that they can express their rational existence, which for Hegel is living freely.³⁴ It is through the state that one develops an identity, one must further pay debt to the State by serving it and understanding that whatever duty they are voluntarily fulfilling for the State under its laws are reasonable.³⁵

But for citizens to perform their civic duties, they must have health-care access, quality living conditions, and a route to success unhindered by political discrimination. Hence, Rev. King proclaims, “We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and hotels of the cities! We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro’s basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one.”³⁶ In the previous quotations is King’s contention that his people *will* be satisfied once they have fair lodging and equal access to opportunities. Therefore, if the United States does manage to genuinely secure those standards for the disenfranchised, the disenfranchised will naturally understand the laws as rational.

But for all of this to occur, the state must first meet all the requirements. Since in the United States not everyone has equal access to health care benefits, employment and educational opportunities, or even legislative representation, the state is not rational in a Hegelian sense of the term. As a result, immanent critique by social reformers are actually *required* for the state to progress at all. Therefore, while Hegel’s totally rational state may not need immanent critique, no state is rational until it has fulfilled its obligations to the society that sustains it.³⁷ In other words, until the rational state has reached its ultimate goal, its *telos*, it must openly

³³ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 41.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 77.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 191.

³⁶ King, Martin L., Jr. "I Have a Dream." Speech, 3.

³⁷ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 272.

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encourage immanent critique. The end of history is only reached when all the requirements have been totally fulfilled.³⁸

As such, I contend that social reformers are not actually irrational according to Hegel, but rational beings who progress the state, and that their social reform is actually the fulfillment of the duty each subject — both the passive citizen and active reformer — has to its community. This is precisely why Rev. King declares proudly, “The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to distrust all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny.”³⁹

However, Schopenhauer returns to object to my response: when political theories are based on “constructive histories, guided by a shallow optimism” the governments they create “always ultimately end in a comfortable, substantial, fat” degree of success for the regime, but whose moral rectitude “remains essentially unaltered.”⁴⁰ In these systems, the only form of social perfection is “intellectual perfection” because of the philosophers that uphold the standards of the immoral regime; no matter how abhorrent, their philosophies justify the regime’s oppressive structures with abstract concepts.⁴¹ The disgruntled lecturer raises a difficult challenge: could it be the case that Hegel’s logic is simply a totalitarian system built on a consistent ideological lie that coerces people into submission to the demands of the state?

Though one can draw parallels, appropriating Hegel’s system as totalitarian would be an oversimplification; his thought avoids the charge of being totalitarian and prohibiting

³⁸ Ibid, 370.

³⁹ King, Martin L., Jr. "I Have a Dream." Speech, 3.

⁴⁰ Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*, 443.

⁴¹ Ibid.

individual freedom because the state's rationality is dependent on all its citizens feeling at home inside the state. Hegel realizes that freedom to do as one pleases often ends in slavery.⁴² If one chooses to do something arbitrarily, there is no rational justification behind it; one would simply be a slave to his/her ego, instinct, or appetitive desires. But, as distinguished scholar Pinkard points out, Hegel desires us to be free from coercion *by other humans as well*, and not just by natural desires and circumstances.⁴³ *An und für sich, In-and-for-itself*, requires being at home with oneself by finding itself in the other.⁴⁴ Self-awareness can only be achieved if one recognizes other selves to make it aware: the state can only reach self-awareness by allowing all the members of its body to be free from coercion, which requires feeling at home in their society.

Further, as Hegel views freedom as objective, it can only be available to people when they act rationally *according to universal principles*.⁴⁵ In a communist society, peoples' choices only work for the good of the state — but since a state's justification for existence is supposed to be predicated upon rationality, it would not even exist in the rational sense if people were simply coerced into obeying its commands.⁴⁶ Like the body, a state is not complete without its parts: if some people are being tortured for the state to continue, the state is not truly rationally justified, as its people are not able to actualize freedom or feel “at home” within the state.⁴⁷ If the majority in society disregards the dignity of certain members of society, the State has not developed to its potential.

⁴² Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 356.

⁴³ Pinkard, Terry. *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*, 53.

⁴⁴ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 356.

⁴⁵ Pinkard, Terry. *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*, 53.

⁴⁶ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 276.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 67.

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Accordingly, Rev. King proclaims, "We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their adulthood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating, 'For White Only.'"⁴⁸

Ultimately, I contend that Hegel does not deny the dignity of the disenfranchised and disregard the criticisms of social reformers like Rev. King and Solzhenitsyn, and that *Sittlichkeit* is relevant to contemporary society. It is precisely the opposite: Hegel acts as a call to action. In our society, we cannot realize our own freedom if there are members of society who are marginally oppressed. Without one of our vital organs, we cannot function properly to survive. I conclude that in reality, Hegel's work truly endorses answering King's call in *I Have A Dream*:

Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children...They have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone. We cannot turn back...And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true. With this faith we will be able to work together...knowing that we will be free one day. When we allow freedom to ring, we...will be able to join hands and sing..."Free at last, Free at last, thank God a-mighty, We are free at last."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ King, Martin L., Jr. "I Have a Dream." Speech, 3.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 2-6.

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