

I

Introduction: Perspectives on Hegel's Idea of Freedom

1.1. *Freedom and Sittlichkeit*

In a striking passage from his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel makes the following claim: 'For the everyday contingencies of private life, definitions of what is good and bad or right and wrong are supplied by the laws and customs [*Sitten*] of each state, and there is no great difficulty in recognizing them' (*VG* 94/80). 'The individual's *morality*', he adds, will then 'consist in fulfilling the duties imposed upon him by his social station [*Stand*]' (*VG* 94/80). Thus, 'If someone declares that, in ordinary private existence [*gewöhnlichen Privatverhältnisse*], it is not at all easy to decide what is right and good . . . we can only attribute this to his evil or malevolent will which is looking for excuses to escape its duties, for it is not difficult to recognize what those duties are' (*VG* 94/80).

These assertions together articulate a thesis that is elaborated and developed at greater length in Hegel's most important work of social and political philosophy, the *Philosophy of Right*. The thesis, which I shall simply call the *Sittlichkeit* thesis, concerns the content of the ethical norms that should guide our everyday practical reasoning. These norms, the *Sittlichkeit* thesis claims, consist in nothing other than the duties and virtues embedded in the central institutions of modern social life. In modern European societies, as Hegel argues at length in the *Philosophy of Right*, they consist in the duties and virtues inscribed in the 'concrete ethos' or 'ethical life' (*Sittlichkeit*) of three especially central institutions: the family, civil society, and the state.

The *Sittlichkeit* thesis is at once attractive and deeply troubling. Its appeal derives from the thought that practical reason implicitly or explicitly involves dialogue with others and finding reasons that are acceptable to those with whom we disagree. If, in the course of practical reasoning, we strive for some Archimedean standpoint that abstracts from human experience and relationships, then we seem to

be abandoning the very connection with others that makes a meaningful exchange of reasons possible. If, by contrast, our way of reasoning is, as Michael Walzer puts it, ‘to interpret to our fellow citizens the world of meanings that we share’, then we at least start from some consensus on the basis of which further disagreements and conflicts can be adjudicated.¹ By insisting that the content of everyday practical reasoning is given by the duties and virtues embedded in the central institutions and practices of our common social experience, Hegel’s view makes it possible to address those with whom we disagree with some hope of convergence.

The troubling aspects of Hegel’s thesis are often remarked upon.² One problem is that the model of practical reason proposed by the thesis looks *under-determinate*. Faced with some practical dilemma, a given individual might find himself pulled in conflicting directions by the demands of the different institutions and traditions of his community.³ Without further refinement, Hegel’s model of practical reason would not, for example, resolve the dilemma confronting a young man described by Jean-Paul Sartre, who is torn between his duty as a family member to care for his mother and his duty as a citizen to join the Resistance.⁴ The ethical and ideological pluralism characteristic of modern industrialized societies poses a different kind of problem of under-determination. Duties and virtues that are embedded in the practices of one ideologically defined group in a given society are unlikely to be found in the practices of all others. In a suitably Hegelian manner, the very appeal of the *Sittlichkeit* thesis—that it seeks to locate the content of practical reason in a consensus defined by our common social experience—may also be one of its greatest weaknesses: for under conditions of modernity, where ‘the fact of pluralism’ prevails, there may be no sufficiently thick common experience to reason from.⁵

¹ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, p. xiv.

² For an excellent discussion, with reference to recent reformulations of Hegel’s thesis, see O’Neill, ‘Ethical Reasoning and Ideological Pluralism’.

³ Throughout this study I have generally used the masculine pronouns to stand for ‘individual’, ‘person’, ‘agent’, and so on. Hegel’s notorious views about the capacities of women for free and rational agency (e.g. at *PR* §166, A) make it hard to be confident that he uses such terms in a more inclusive way. Since so much of the study is devoted to interpreting and engaging with Hegel’s views, use of feminine pronouns would misleadingly create the impression that Hegel held more enlightened views about women than he actually did.

⁴ Sartre, *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme*, 39–42.

⁵ The phrase ‘fact of pluralism’ is from Rawls, *Political Liberalism*.

A second, even more worrying feature of Hegel's thesis is that it seems, at first glance, to be unacceptably *conservative*. The thesis seems to presuppose that modern social institutions are legitimate or at least that they are not seriously illegitimate or unjust. If they were seriously illegitimate—if they systematically worked to stifle human development and flourishing—then it is far from obvious that the duties and virtues they incorporate represent the content of everyday practical reason. One might think instead that, under such conditions, the 'world of meanings that we share' would be characterized by what Marxists term 'false consciousness'. And that modern social institutions *are* seriously illegitimate is exactly what many radical critics of modernity maintain. The principled opponent of the bourgeois family, the socialist critic of modern capitalism, and the anarchist and cosmopolitan sceptics about the contemporary state, each wish to deny the legitimacy of certain central forms of modern social life. To the extent that the *Sittlichkeit* thesis ignores, or assumes away, the concerns of such radical critics, it seems to involve a serious conservative bias.

A central aim of this study is to understand how Hegel hopes to handle objections of this form. How can he maintain that the content of everyday practical reasoning is given by the *Sittlichkeit* of the modern European world without exposing himself to the objections that his position is under-determinate and unacceptably conservative? My thesis is that we can make progress in answering this question through a philosophical exploration of what I call Hegel's 'idea of freedom'. By this I mean his theory of what it is to be free (the 'concept' of freedom) and his account of the social and political contexts in which this freedom is developed, realized, and sustained (the 'actualization' of freedom).⁶ Hegel's lengthy discussion of *Sittlichkeit* in the *Philosophy of Right* begins with the striking assertion that 'Ethical Life [*die Sittlichkeit*] 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' (*PR* §142). It is my contention that an exploration of Hegel's 'idea of freedom' can help us to understand why it is that he takes modern *Sittlichkeit* to define the content appropriate for our everyday practical reasoning.

⁶ The 'idea' (*Idee*) of *x*, for Hegel, is defined as the 'concept' (*Begriff*) of *x* together with the 'actualization' (*Verwirklichung*) or 'objectivity' (*Objektivität*) of that concept. See e.g. *PR* §1 and *Enz.* i, §213.

A philosophical reconstruction of Hegel's idea of freedom can, in fact, not only help to clarify his thesis concerning the relationship between *Sittlichkeit* and practical reason but should also improve our understanding of all of the major claims and propositions of his social philosophy. Freedom is the value that Hegel most greatly admires and the central organizing concept of his social philosophy. He holds that freedom is the 'worthiest and most sacred possession of man' (*PR* §215A) and thinks that the entire normative sphere, or 'system of right', can be viewed as 'the realm of actualized freedom' (*PR* §4; cf. §29). He goes so far as to say that freedom is 'the last hinge on which man turns, a highest possible pinnacle, which does not allow itself to be impressed by anything' (*VGP* iii. 367/459). It is true that concepts such as 'spirit' (*Geist*), 'self-actualization', and 'reconciliation' (*Versöhnung*) are also central to Hegel's social philosophy and that they are sometimes taken to be the key to understanding his outlook.⁷ But what Hegel means by each of these concepts, and how he puts them to use, can be properly appreciated only in the context of an understanding of his idea of freedom. The distinctive feature of spirit—that which distinguishes it from nature—is that it is free (*Enz.* iii, §382, A). The project of reconciliation involves giving people reasons to affirm the central institutions and practices of their social world by showing that those institutions and practices work to actualize freedom. And Hegel holds that individuals achieve full self-actualization to the extent that they develop and exercise their capacities for free and rational agency. The key to understanding Hegel's social philosophy, it can confidently be said, is coming to terms with his idea of freedom.

Much of what Hegel has to say about freedom is highly controversial and paradoxical and conflicts with the received opinions and assumptions of mainstream contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. The claim that a kind of freedom is realized through commitment to the duties and virtues of *Sittlichkeit* will already have struck many readers as counter-intuitive. In addition, Hegel explicitly rejects the common-sense understanding of freedom as 'being able to do as one wants' (*PR* §15) and instead, in a view that is widely viewed as discredited, follows Kant in equating true freedom with rational self-determination. To make matters worse, Hegel himself draws

⁷ These themes are emphasized in three different studies respectively to which I am greatly indebted for my understanding of Hegel: Taylor, *Hegel*; Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*; and Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy*.

attention to one of the main worries about the Kantian understanding of freedom—that it is vacuous—but then insists that his own theory of *Sittlichkeit* somehow manages to overcome this objection. He praises contractarians such as Rousseau and Fichte for making freedom the principle of political legitimacy, but completely rejects the social contract theory that they take to be an implication of that principle. He defends the institution of property as the ‘first existence of freedom’ (*PR* §45). And, most controversially of all, he asserts that individuals achieve full or true freedom only as members of the state—an assertion that has perhaps forever associated Hegel’s name with Prussianism and even totalitarianism.

My ambition, in the present study, is to develop an interpretation of Hegel’s idea of freedom that is clear, precise, and faithful to the written texts and recorded lectures of his mature period. As I will explain in this introductory chapter, it is my contention that the intersection between Hegel’s idea of freedom and his theory of *Sittlichkeit* has not been well understood in standard accounts of his social philosophy and that my interpretation casts this relationship in a distinctive light. I do not attempt an overall defence of Hegel’s idea of freedom and am sceptical, for reasons I will indicate, about certain parts of it. I do think I can show, however, that there is something original and valuable in Hegel’s account and that some of the central elements of the theory are more coherent and less vulnerable to certain standard objections than is commonly supposed.

The decision to concentrate on Hegel’s mature writings and lectures reflects several assumptions. One is that, although texts from earlier periods in Hegel’s development anticipate and can help to clarify his most important mature ideas, there are also significant differences between early and mature texts that make it impossible to justify treating the entire Hegelian corpus as a unified body of thought. Over the years, Hegel changed his mind about substantive issues, such as the appropriateness of the classical world as a model for modern Europe, and about the structure and mode of presentation of social, ethical, and political theory. It is not before about 1817 that he arrives at a reasonably settled set of views about the form and content of an account of freedom. A second assumption is that there are already a number of excellent studies that take a chronological or developmental approach to Hegel’s thought and it is difficult to see how much more of interest could be said here by adopting the same

strategy.⁸ By contrast, there is, to my knowledge, no thorough, full-length study in the English-language secondary literature of the account of freedom contained in Hegel's mature work.

For the purposes of this study, I shall assume that Hegel's 'mature' period extends from about 1817 until his death in 1831—roughly, if not exactly, the time he spent in Berlin. There is clearly some degree of arbitrariness involved in deciding when exactly Hegel's mature social philosophy begins, but several considerations suggest that 1817 would be an appropriate year at which to draw the line. It was in 1817 that Hegel published the first edition of his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, which contains an extended treatment of both the concept of the will and 'objective spirit', and forms the basis of his subsequent lecture series on the philosophy of right (*Rechtsphilosophie*) and of the published version of the *Philosophy of Right*. It was also in 1817–18 that Hegel gave the first of what would turn out to be seven lecture series on *Rechtsphilosophie*.⁹ There is remarkably little change in Hegel's theory of freedom from these two texts, through to the *Philosophy of Right* published in 1821, the lecture series of the mid-1820s, and the 1827 and 1830 editions of the *Encyclopedia*.

⁸ Good discussions of Hegel's early development can be found, for example, in: Plant, *Hegel*; Taylor, *Hegel*, ch. 2; Dickey, *Hegel*; Harris, *Hegel's Development*; Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*; and Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, ch. 7.

⁹ Hegel lectured on *Rechtsphilosophie* in 1817–18 (*VPR17*), 1818–19 (*VPR18*), 1819–20 (*VPR19*), 1821–2, 1822–3 (*VPR iii*), 1824–5 (*VPR iv*), and 1831. There is no surviving transcript of the 1821–2 lectures; the lecture series begun in autumn 1831 was abruptly cut short by Hegel's death. There is no longer much controversy about drawing on Hegel's lecture materials as well as his published writings and I have done so freely throughout this study. In the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel explicitly says that the book is meant to accompany his lectures (*PR*, Preface, p. 11/9), suggesting that he himself took the lectures to represent an authoritative statement of his own views rather than just work in progress or a series of off-the-cuff remarks. Indeed, in the light of the harsh censorship laws in effect in Prussia throughout the 1820s there are some grounds for thinking that, in places, the lectures offer a more authoritative statement of Hegel's views than do the published writings. It is also worth noting that, for a variety of reasons, we can be quite confident about the authenticity of the lecture transcriptions that we now possess. We know, for instance, that Hegel dictated his lectures in a slow, methodical style that was highly conducive to taking accurate notes and that his transcribers were reasonably conscientious about recording exactly what Hegel said. It is true that the 'Additions' or *Zusätze* based on Hegel's lectures that have been included in standard editions of Hegel's works since the 1830s are highly selective and sometimes taken out of context, but these problems can largely be overcome by referring to the complete transcriptions from which they are taken, which are now available in published form. For discussion of the relationship between Hegel's recorded lectures and his published writings, see the Editors' Introductions to *VPR*, *VPR18*, and *VPR19*; and Tunick, *Hegel's Political Philosophy*, 7–11.

Chapters 2–6 of this study each examine a key element of Hegel’s idea of freedom. In Chapter 2, I explore Hegel’s attempt to equate freedom with rational self-determination, asking what he means by rational self-determination and whether his view is vulnerable to certain common objections. Then, in Chapter 3, after reviewing Hegel’s ‘empty formalism’ objection to Kantian ethics, I set out the structure of Hegel’s defence of what I call (following Henry Allison) the ‘reciprocity thesis’: the thesis that freedom and commitment to the duties and virtues of *Sittlichkeit* are reciprocal conditions. Chapters 4–6 attempt to fill out and further substantiate the structure introduced in Chapter 3. By exploring Hegel’s engagement with social contract theory, Chapter 4 develops an interpretation of the argumentative strategy of Hegel’s main work of social philosophy, the *Philosophy of Right*. Chapter 5 seeks to reinforce this interpretation through a detailed consideration of one particularly important institution discussed by Hegel—private property. Finally, Chapter 6 returns to the intersection of freedom and modern *Sittlichkeit*, looking, in particular, at Hegel’s claim that individuals are most fully free in taking up the role of good citizens of the state. Each chapter discusses a discrete and, I think, interesting issue in Hegel’s account of freedom and, to some extent, can be read in isolation from the rest of the book. The overall account of how Hegel views the relationship between freedom and modern *Sittlichkeit*, and how he wants to respond to the objections to his *Sittlichkeit* thesis sketched out earlier, requires a reading of the whole book.

The remainder of this introductory chapter is devoted to contrasting the interpretation to be developed in the present study with some of the standard interpretations of how Hegel understands the intersection between *Sittlichkeit* and freedom. I distinguish between *conventionalist*, *metaphysical*, *historicist*, and *self-actualization* readings of Hegel’s account (§1.2) and discuss the first three of these in §§1.3–1.5. In §1.6 I then give a preliminary sketch of a variant of the self-actualization reading to be defended in this study—which I label the *civic humanist* interpretation. Finally, in §1.7, I point out some of the ways in which the different perspectives mentioned above can be seen as convergent.

1.2. *Four Readings*

I am proposing, then, to explore Hegel's social philosophy through the lens of his *Sittlichkeit* thesis—a thesis that is intimately connected with the central organizing idea of Hegel's social thought, the idea of freedom. The *Sittlichkeit* thesis, as we have seen, claims that the content of everyday practical reasoning is given by the duties and virtues embedded in the institutions of modern social life. The thesis has its obvious attractions, but it also risks being both *under-determinate* and unacceptably *conservative*, and it should prove a useful entry into Hegel's social philosophy to explore how he proposes to defend it.

Looking at the vast secondary literature on Hegel's social philosophy, it is possible, I think, to distinguish four different kinds of interpretation of Hegel's position on this issue:

The conventionalist reading. According to this view, Hegel simply does not think it possible to step outside the ethical norms embedded in existing social institutions to enquire into their standing or acceptability. A good reason, on this account of practical reason, is simply a reason that has come to be regarded as compelling by a particular community at a particular moment in time. The implication of this reading is that Hegel would respond to the under-determinacy objection by pointing to pre-established norms of conflict resolution embedded in the shared meanings of communities and/or by emphasizing that there are limits in the extent to which we can expect practical reason to resolve certain kinds of ethical conflict. Likewise, he would respond to the conservatism objection by arguing that any attempt to evaluate institutions and practices 'all the way down' would be incoherent: radical criticism and deep justification are quixotic enterprises founded on a misunderstanding of practical reason. According to the conventionalist reading, then, it is not just the content of our 'everyday' practical reasoning that is circumscribed by the duties and virtues of modern social institutions; it is the content of *all* practical reasoning that is limited in this way.

The metaphysical reading. Hegel does think it possible to step outside the ethical norms embedded in existing social institutions to give them some kind of rational warrant. This philosophical activity of reconciling us to the existing practices and institutions of our social

world involves seeing them as necessary vehicles for the self-realization of God. Thus this view deals with the under-determination problem by positing an external, metaphysical standpoint that can offer ordering and resolution in the case of internal conflict. It responds to the conservatism objection by holding out the possibility, in principle, of a full critical examination of the existing social world through philosophical reflection from the metaphysical standpoint.

The historicist reading. As with the metaphysical reading, this view holds that Hegel does think it possible to provide through philosophical reflection a rational warrant for the ethical norms embedded in existing practices and institutions. This philosophical warranting involves seeing the existing meanings and reasons of a particular, historically situated community as a rational response to, and improvement on, the inadequacies and insufficiencies of historically previous attempts to articulate a set of meanings and reasons. This view sees Hegel's response to the under-determination and conservatism objections as structurally similar to the response envisioned by the metaphysical reading.

The self-actualization reading. This view shares with the metaphysical and historicist readings the claim that Hegel thinks it possible to provide through philosophical reflection a rational warrant for the ethical norms embedded in existing practices and institutions. It also shares the attitudes implicit in these readings concerning Hegel's response to the under-determination and conservatism objections. What distinguishes this interpretation from the metaphysical and historicist interpretations is its account of what the activity of philosophical reflection involves. Rather than emphasizing God's self-realization, or any historical narrative, this view sees philosophical warranting in Hegel as involving the demonstration that existing institutions and practices promote, or provide the locus for, human self-actualization.

It should be clear that the first of these interpretations conflicts quite sharply with the other three. Whereas the first view places serious restrictions on the possibility of coherently reasoning about our institutions and practices, the other three readings each suggest a different kind of story which might be told about our institutions and

practices that could, at least in principle, help to prioritize conflicting considerations and speak to the concerns of a radical critic or sceptic. Although it can be (and sometimes is) argued that the first view contains the acceptable core of Hegel's doctrine, whereas one or several of the other views represent 'baggage' that should be jettisoned,¹⁰ it cannot be argued that *Hegel* adhered to both the first view and any of the other three views.

By contrast, there is no obvious inconsistency in holding that more than one of the metaphysical, historicist, and self-actualization readings captures an aspect of Hegel's position. We can often characterize a single set of facts or events using a variety of different, but mutually consistent, narrative strategies, each of which fastens upon and accentuates some different detail or aspect of the story. It is possible that Hegel views the existing practices and institutions of the modern social world as: (a) a necessary instrument of God's self-realization; (b) a rational response to, and resolution of, the inadequacies and insufficiencies of historically previous attempts to articulate a set of meanings and reasons; and (c) the context of full human self-actualization.

Nor would it be difficult to imagine someone adhering to a hybrid interpretation of Hegel's project—one that combined elements from the metaphysical, historicist, and/or self-actualization stories into a single reading. For instance, a standard view of Hegel's project combines elements of the metaphysical and historicist interpretations. The process by which God realizes himself through different forms of human community is, on this view, a fundamentally historical one: each attempt by God to realize himself through human community is progressively more adequate and complete, with the modern European community fully responding to and resolving the insufficiencies and contradictions of previous attempts. The self-actualization view can also be combined with metaphysical and/or historicist elements. Allen Wood, for instance, has used the term 'historicized naturalism' to describe Hegel's position. According to Wood, Hegel is proposing a self-actualization account of modern ethical relationships but not one that relies on a general account of the human good. Instead, the ideas of the self and its good to be actualized are always contextualized in a determinate social and cultural situation—one that can be viewed as the outcome of a historical

¹⁰ See e.g. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 197–8.

process in which human beings collectively and cumulatively strive for self-knowledge.¹¹

The present study will defend a variant of the self-actualization view that I shall term the civic humanist reading. In the next three sections I argue that the conventionalist reading is unsatisfactory and that the same is true of the metaphysical and historicist readings to the extent that they are not complemented by some other view. In §1.6 I offer a brief sketch of the civic humanist reading and then, in §1.7, go on to indicate the ways in which my interpretation remains compatible with the recognition of significant metaphysical and historicist dimensions in Hegel's thought.

1.3. *The Conventionalist Reading*

Most Hegel specialists do not favour a conventionalist view of Hegel's project, but it is common enough amongst non-specialists, and has sufficient independent plausibility, to deserve some comment.¹² The strongest case for the conventionalist interpretation can be made from a reading of the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*. Consider, for example, the following passage:

To comprehend *what is* is the task of philosophy, for *what is* is reason. As far as the individual is concerned, each individual is in any case a *child of his time*; thus philosophy, too, is *its own time comprehended in thoughts*. It is just as foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as that an individual can overleap his own time or leap over Rhodes. If his theory does indeed transcend his own time, if it builds itself a world *as it ought to be*, then it certainly has an existence, but only within his

¹¹ Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, ch. 1.

¹² For the explicit repudiation of the conventionalist interpretation by three well-known Hegel scholars, see Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, 202–8; Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism*, 106–9; and Steven B. Smith, *Hegel's Critique of Liberalism*, 130–1. For a characterization of Hegel's position as conventionalist, see e.g. Benn, *A Theory of Freedom*, 173–4. A Hegel scholar who explicitly develops a 'nonfoundationalist' reading of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* is Tunick ('Hegel's Nonfoundationalism'). According to Tunick, 'Hegel's strategy as a political philosopher' is to 'refer to ungrounded views we hold and use to test a practice' rather than to appeal 'to a criterion external to the activity of practical reasoning and deliberation', such as 'a metaphysic of history' (p. 319). Tunick recognizes that this approach will strike some people as 'but a trick, or one big circle, to justify practices by appealing to standards that presuppose the very practices', but he emphasizes that his account is offered as an interpretation rather than a defence of Hegel's method (p. 335).

opinions—a pliant medium in which the imagination can construct anything it pleases. (*PR*, Preface, pp. 26/21–2)

The assertion that ‘*what is* is reason’ might be construed as implying that the criteria for practical reasoning are found in the practices and institutions of the existing community and that no such criteria are available outside those practices and institutions (for ‘everyday’ or any other form of practical reason). The claims that ‘to comprehend *what is* is the task of philosophy’ and that ‘philosophy is *its own time comprehended in thoughts*’ could then be read as assigning an essentially interpretative role to philosophy: philosophical reflection on ethical and political questions consists in looking at actual practices and institutions and discerning the meanings and norms that are embedded or latent in them. Finally, the strictures against transcending one’s own time and setting up a world ‘as it ought to be’ fit neatly into this picture as well: if criteria for practical reasoning are inescapably rooted in actual practices and institutions, then any attempt to argue rationally in abstraction from those institutions and practices (from the ‘contemporary world’) would be incoherent.

Other passages in the Preface seem to lend additional support for this interpretation. The claim that philosophical reflection involves comprehension of the present is repeated several times (pp. 25–7/20–2) and, of course, the Preface closes with a famous assertion of the inevitably retrospective character of philosophy (p. 28/23). Foremost in the minds of those advocating a conventionalist reading, however, is probably Hegel’s notorious dictum that ‘What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational’ (p. 24/20). Even if we recognize Hegel’s distinction between ‘actuality’ and ‘existence’, and so avoid the mistake of reading the dictum as an unqualified endorsement of the status quo,¹³ the dictum does seem to reinforce the idea that, for Hegel, criteria for practical reasoning are in some way embedded or latent in the actual practices and institutions of a community.¹⁴

¹³ Virtually every commentator on Hegel now acknowledges this distinction and stresses the dictum’s compatibility with a broadly reformist political outlook. See e.g. Knox ‘Hegel and Prussianism’, 18; Avineri, *Hegel’s Theory of the Modern State*, 127; Wood, *Hegel’s Ethical Thought*, 8–14; and Hardimon, *Hegel’s Social Philosophy*, 53–4.

¹⁴ Michael Hardimon interprets the dictum as committing Hegel to a thesis about the conditions of normative validity, which says that valid norms are rooted in the essence of the things to which they apply (they figure ‘centrally in the characterization of the thing’s kind and play a central explanatory role in accounting for the thing’s

One response to this argument would be to maintain that there is a tension between Hegel's remarks in the Preface and his systematic philosophy, as set out in the main text of the *Philosophy of Right* and elsewhere. It is sometimes pointed out that the Preface was added onto the book at the last second and seems to have been partly designed to deflect the attention of the Prussian censors by downplaying the critical, reformist implications of Hegel's political theory.¹⁵ This is not a very satisfactory response, however, to the extent that there are many rhetorical strategies Hegel might have used to deal with the Prussian censors besides advancing a thesis about practical reason. Instead, I will argue that there are reasons *internal* to the Preface to question the conventionalist interpretation set out above.

Let us start with the claim that the task of philosophy is 'to comprehend what is'. According to the conventionalist reading, this claim implies or presupposes something about the *criteria* of practical reasoning or of philosophical reflection more generally. A different view, however, would be that Hegel is making an assertion about the *subject matter* of philosophical reflection: philosophers should spend their time rationally comprehending the here and now rather than imagining a world as it ought to be. A claim about the subject matter of philosophy leaves open the question of the criteria of philosophical reflection—the question of what would *count* as an adequate comprehension of the present.

Support for this reading is found in the fact that, in the Preface itself, Hegel broaches the issue of criteria in a way that is awkward for the conventionalist interpretation: 'The *truth* concerning *right*,

normal operation') (*Hegel's Social Philosophy*, 58–9). He infers from this that 'Hegel's basic normative outlook limits criticism [in] that it rules out "external criticism", criticism that is not based on norms rooted in the essences of the institutions to which it is applied' (p. 80). However, Hardimon also attributes to Hegel the view that the essence of the modern social world 'is *absolutely* as it ought to be, because it reflects a correct understanding of the human spirit' (p. 74). This statement would seem to imply that there are criteria of normative correctness external to the essences rooted in actual institutions (in Hardimon's account these criteria involve the degree to which the essence of a social world adequately recognizes both subjectivity and social membership (p. 75)). The key to this apparent tension in Hardimon's interpretation may be that he is understanding 'criticism' to mean something like 'condemnation' or 'issuing instructions on how the world ought to be' rather than taking it in the neutral sense of 'evaluation'. It is implicit in Hardimon's view that Hegel *does* allow for external evaluation of institutions and practices (and their 'essences')—indeed, this is a crucial part of the project of reconciliation.

¹⁵ For a discussion of this view, see e.g. Knox, 'Hegel and Prussianism'.

ethics, and the state is at any rate *as old* as its *exposition and promulgation* in *public laws and in public morality and religion*. What more does this require, inasmuch as the thinking mind is not content to possess it in this proximate manner?" (p. 14/11). On the conventionalist view, one would expect Hegel to answer that *nothing* more is required: to engage in practical reason just is to explore what truths concerning right, ethics, and the state are expounded and promulgated in public law, morality, and religion and to know these truths in a 'proximate' manner and not in any deeper way. But, instead, the passage continues with a very different answer:¹⁶

What it needs is to be *comprehended* as well, so that the content which is already rational in itself may also gain a rational form and thereby appear justified to free thinking. For such thinking does not stop at what is *given*, whether the latter is supported by the external positive authority of the state or of mutual agreement among human beings, or by the authority of inner feeling and the heart and by the testimony of the spirit which immediately concurs with this, but starts out from itself and thereby demands to know itself as united in its innermost being with the truth. (p. 14/11)

Here Hegel makes it clear that he sees a difference between grasping that certain ethical ideas and norms are part of 'public morality', or even enjoy 'mutual agreement among human beings', and the *comprehension* or *justification* of those ideas and norms. In the light of this distinction, it cannot be the case that he reduces the criteria of philosophical reflection to the widely accepted norms and meanings embedded in our institutions and practices, for it is these that need 'to be comprehended as well'. Rather, he insists that philosophical comprehension and justification must prescind from everything 'given' and instead (in an obscure phrase that will require much more elaboration) 'start out from itself'. As Hegel puts it later in the Preface, 'what matters' in philosophy 'is to recognize in the semblance of the temporal and transient the substance which is immanent and the eternal which is present' (p. 25/20). Philosophy is concerned with the present—this is its subject matter—but its concern is not merely to interpret or describe the present but to recognize its rational and 'eternal' aspect. It is this recognition of reason as 'the rose in the cross of the present' that Hegel calls 'reconciliation' (p. 26/22).

¹⁶ In the original German, the whole passage is in fact part of one long question, but, because the question is clearly a rhetorical one, I think Nisbet's translation is faithful to Hegel's meaning.

So Hegel's claim that the task of philosophy is comprehension of the present need not commit him to a conventionalist view of practical reason. In fact, attention to what he has to say about 'comprehending' the present strongly suggests a quite different picture.¹⁷ But what about some of the other views expressed in the Preface—Hegel's hostility towards empty moralizing about how things ought to be, his insistence on the retrospective character of philosophy, and his conviction that the 'rational is actual'? If the criteria for philosophical reflection on ethics and politics are made independent of existing institutions and practices (of everything 'given'), does this not open the door to the possibility that those institutions and practices are not rational after all and thus that the rational is not actual (because it is not in existence at all)? And would it not be conceivable that an attitude of critical, even revolutionary, moralizing would then become appropriate after all? The great strength of the conventionalist reading is that it seems able to account for Hegelian commitments on these issues.

There are, however, other ways of accounting for these commitments in Hegel's thought. In particular, Hegel seems attracted to a metaphysical thesis about the power of reason in history as well as an epistemological thesis about the possibility of reliable knowledge of rational forms of human community that have not been realized in experience.

The metaphysical thesis is perhaps best encapsulated in Hegel's remark that 'reason' is an 'infinite power' that is 'sufficiently powerful to be able to create something more than just an ideal' (*VG* 28/27). If one were to accept this thesis—Hegel claims several lines later that it is 'proven in philosophy'—then one could be confident that the rational is actual and that critical moralizing is misguided *without* assuming that actual practices and institutions provide the criteria for philosophical reflection.

It is harder to find explicit affirmations of the epistemological thesis in Hegel's writings, but, on the reading of Hegel I will develop in this study, it is a plausible (although perhaps not compelling) corollary of his view of reason. The thesis is that there is something in the nature of a rational social order that makes it difficult, or even impossible, to know what the character of that order would be unless it has been

¹⁷ Note too that 'comprehend' is here a translation of Hegel's term *begreifen*, which, in his thought, always carries the connotation of a rational, conceptual form of grasping some truth.

instantiated somewhere in practice. As we shall see in Chapter 6 below, Hegel emphasizes that a rational social order (such as he describes in the *Philosophy of Right*) is ‘effective’, ‘self-sufficient’, and ‘organic’: it involves a whole system of interlocking institutions which together imbue in people dispositions that support the social order’s own maintenance and reproduction. The thought behind the epistemological thesis is simply that, in the absence of any concrete empirical instantiation of some model of community, it will be extremely difficult to evaluate whether the community satisfies the ‘self-sufficiency’ condition needed for it to qualify as a rational social order. If Hegel does affirm an epistemological thesis of this kind, then once again his strictures against abstract moralizing, and his insistence on the retrospective character of philosophy, make sense without attributing to him conventionalist views on the foundations of practical reason.¹⁸

The metaphysical and epistemological theses obviously need a great deal more elaboration to be rendered even remotely plausible, but that will not be my concern here. If the theses are not defensible, then this would push Hegel’s thought in a recognizably ‘left-Hegelian’ direction (an outcome that many of Hegel’s readers would regard as welcome). Rather, the main point is that, if Hegel does affirm one or both of the theses, then his remarks in the Preface need not commit him to a conventionalist view of practical reason. If we combine this observation with an appreciation of commitments that very clearly are found in the Preface—the hostility to stopping at the merely ‘given’, the aspiration to find ‘the eternal which is present’—then the conventionalist interpretation becomes untenable.

1.4. *The Metaphysical Reading*

In an introductory paragraph to the discussion of *Sittlichkeit* in the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel returns once more to the question of how ethical duties are justified. ‘A theory of duties’, he asserts,

¹⁸ An argument of this kind is hinted at in a passage in the Preface in which Hegel criticizes Fries for reducing ‘the complex inner articulation of the ethical . . . which, through determinate distinctions between the various spheres of public life and the rights they are based on, and through the strict proportions in which every pillar, arch, and buttress is held together, produces the strength of the whole from the harmony of its parts’ to a mush of ‘heart, friendship, and enthusiasm’ (*PR*, Preface, p. 19/15–16). The idea seems to be that the moralizing pronouncements of a philosopher like Fries could not hope to be attuned to the complexly articulated, self-sustaining character of an ethical community.

unless it forms part of philosophical science, will take its material from existing relations and show its connection with one's own ideas and with commonly encountered principles and thoughts, ends, drives, feelings, etc. . . . But an immanent and consistent theory of duties can be nothing other than the development of *those relations* which are necessitated by the idea of freedom . . . (PR §148)

Once again it is clear that, for Hegel, the justification of ethical duties must go deeper than the 'existing relations' and 'commonly encountered principles' emphasized by conventionalist views of practical reason.¹⁹ This time, however, he adds that 'an immanent and consistent theory of duties' must start from 'the idea of freedom'. Unlike the conventionalist interpretation just considered, the metaphysical, historicist, and self-actualization interpretations each takes seriously this suggestion that the duties of *Sittlichkeit* can be rationally warranted through an exploration of the idea of freedom. Each offers an interpretation of Hegel's idea of freedom that purports to explain why it is that Hegel thinks that the duties and virtues of modern *Sittlichkeit* provide an appropriate basis for everyday practical reasoning.

The metaphysical reading, as I shall understand it, sees a story about the self-realization of God as playing a pivotal role in accounting for this intersection of freedom and modern *Sittlichkeit* in Hegel's thought.²⁰ It is worth distinguishing two different ways in which God might enter the account:

1. God might be the subject, or agency, to whom the freedom enjoyed through modern *Sittlichkeit* is attributed.
2. Individual human beings might enjoy freedom through modern *Sittlichkeit* because, in that context, they are helping to further God's self-realization.

These claims need not be mutually exclusive: it is possible that *both* God *and* the individual human being enjoy freedom through modern

¹⁹ See also PR §3, where Hegel comments that 'a determination of right may be shown to be entirely *grounded in and consistent with* the prevailing *circumstances and existing* legal institutions, yet it may be contrary to right and irrational in and for itself'. And VPR17 207: 'The object of the philosophical science of right is the higher concept of the nature of freedom, without regard to what is valid, to the representation [*Vorstellung*] of the age.'

²⁰ Thus I am understanding the term 'metaphysical' in a fairly restricted sense. For a broader discussion of the senses in which Hegel's philosophy is and is not 'metaphysical', see Beiser, 'Introduction: Hegel and the Problem of Metaphysics', in Beiser (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*.

Sittlichkeit, and that the latter enjoys freedom *because* he is furthering God's self-realization. But the two claims raise different issues and are therefore worth considering separately. Both claims can, in fact, be found in Charles Taylor's work on Hegel, which is easily the most influential and elegant statement of a metaphysical reading of Hegel's position. The discussion that follows focuses mainly on Taylor's interpretation.

(i) *God as the Subject of Freedom*

Taylor starts from Hegel's above-mentioned commitment to showing 'how the concrete content of duty is deduced from the very idea of freedom itself'.²¹ He interprets Hegelian freedom in a very Kantian way as 'radical autonomy' and thus as requiring independence from everything 'given'—from all desires, traditions, and authority.²² More than any of his predecessors, however, Hegel perceived the potential for emptiness lurking in this way of understanding freedom. The interpretative problem becomes one of understanding how Hegel can both affirm the Kantian view of freedom and perceive a potentially devastating objection to that view. According to Taylor, Hegel's solution is to escape the threatened vacuity of radical freedom by attributing freedom not to the human will alone but to the will of 'the cosmic spirit which posits the universe':

Rousseau, Kant, [and] both revolutionary and liberal protagonists of radical autonomy, all defined freedom as *human* freedom, the will as *human* will. Hegel on the other hand believed himself to have shown that man reaches his basic identity in seeing himself as a vehicle of *Geist*. If the substance of the will is thought or reason, and if the will is only free when it follows nothing else but its own thought, the thought or reason in question turns out not to be that of man alone, but rather that of the cosmic spirit which posits the universe . . . everything changes if the will whose autonomy men must realize is not that of man alone but of *Geist*.²³

Taylor draws support for this interpretation from his general account of Hegel's system but also suggests that it is the view 'Hegel was really driving at' (though 'not very perspicuously') in several specific passages in the *Philosophy of Right*.²⁴ At *PR* §29, for instance, Hegel explicitly rejects,

²¹ Taylor, *Hegel*, 371.

²³ *Ibid.* (emphasis in original); see also pp. 92, 375.

²² *Ibid.* 373.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 372–3.

the view, prevalent since Rousseau, according to which the substantial basis and primary factor is supposed to be not the will as rational will which has being in and for itself or the spirit as *true* spirit, but will and spirit as the *particular* individual [besonderes *Individuum*], as the will of the single person [des *Einzelnen*], in his own distinctive capacity for choice [in *seiner eigentümlichen Willkür*]. (Cf. *PR* §258)

What Hegel is driving at in this passage, according to Taylor, is the idea that the primary factor, in thinking about ethical questions, is not the will of the individual human being but the will of ‘*true* spirit’ or God.

Taylor’s interpretative proposal can, in fact, be formulated in either a weak or a strong form. On a weak formulation, the claim is that understanding Hegel’s solution to the dilemma of radical autonomy requires recognizing that *both* human beings *and* God achieve freedom through participation in *Sittlichkeit*. On the strong view, the project of philosophically warranting the institutions and practices of modern social life ultimately requires *abandoning* the standpoint of individual human beings and recognizing, *instead*, that those institutions and practices are needed for the realization of God’s freedom.

There is certainly no shortage of passages, scattered liberally throughout his social philosophy, in which Hegel identifies spirit with a supra-human entity such as God and seems to accord this agent the leading role in his philosophical system (*VG* 45–9/37–43, 58–61/51–3, 69–78/60–7). For this reason, the weak formulation of Taylor’s proposal is extremely plausible: it is, or should be, uncontroversial that God is *one of* the subjects, or agencies—perhaps even the most important such agency—of whom the freedom enjoyed through *Sittlichkeit* is predicated. I doubt, however, that Hegel’s understanding of the intersection of freedom and *Sittlichkeit* requires *abandoning* the human for the cosmic perspective as the strong formulation would have it. For the remainder of this subsection, I want to develop three distinct objections to this view: (i) that there is another way of reading passages like *PR* §29; (ii) that it ignores the many passages in which Hegel does attribute freedom to individual human beings in *Sittlichkeit*; and (iii) that it may rest on a misunderstanding of Hegel’s concept of *Geist*.

To begin with, then, let us take a closer look at the passage from *PR* §29. Commentators like Taylor read it as opposing human freedom to the freedom of some supra-human agency such as the

community as a whole or ‘cosmic spirit’. Another way to understand it, however, would be as contrasting the formal freedom of *Willkür*—the freedom one enjoys in being able to choose what to do²⁵—with what Hegel takes to be the true freedom of rational self-determination.²⁶ This second reading of *PR* §29 would help to explain why Hegel places emphasis on the word *particular* rather than on *individual*: he is concerned here to reject the idea that true freedom is consistent with choosing to follow one’s own particularity (one’s own desires, inclinations, and so on), not to deny that freedom can be attributed to individual human beings. This alternative reading is also supported by a passage from Hegel’s *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, where he asserts that ‘[Rousseau’s] misunderstanding of the universal will proceeds from this, that the concept of freedom must not be taken in the sense of the contingent *Willkür* of each, but in the sense of the rational will, of the will in and for itself’ (*VGP* iii. 307/401). Here it is quite clear that Rousseau’s mistake, in Hegel’s view, is not that he misguidedly predicates freedom of individual human beings but that he stops at a conception of freedom as *Willkür* rather than going all the way to a view of freedom as rational self-determination.

More seriously for the view that Hegel abandons the human for the cosmic perspective—and this is the second objection—there are countless passages in which Hegel does attribute freedom to individual human beings, including the true freedom of rational self-determination that is realized in the state. To take just three examples, Hegel says that ‘in the state the individual has, for the first time, objective freedom’ (*VPR19* 209–10). He asserts that ‘in duty, the individual liberates himself so as to attain substantial freedom’ (*PR* §149). And he holds that ‘the determinations of the will of the individual acquire an objective existence through the state, and it is only

²⁵ Hegel defines *Willkür* as ‘wählen zu können’ (‘being able to choose’) at *VPR19* 62 (cf. *PR* §§14–15). In general, Hegel’s term *Willkür* is notoriously difficult to translate into English. Philosophers such as Kant and Fichte used it to mean the capacity, or power, to choose or decide (literally to ‘elect’). By the early nineteenth century, however, it had taken on, in addition, the more pejorative meaning of ‘arbitrariness’ or ‘caprice’. Although Hegel’s usage of *Willkür* clearly has both of these meanings in mind, where I do not simply leave it as *Willkür*, I generally translate the term as the ‘capacity for choice’ or ‘individual choice’ to underscore the fact that Hegel wants to make various philosophical points against his predecessors and not just to redefine a word.

²⁶ See Theunissen, ‘The Repressed Intersubjectivity in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*’, 4.

through the state that they attain their truth and actualization' (*PR* §261A). These and other passages²⁷ show that, even when discussing the true freedom of rational self-determination, Hegel attributes freedom not only to supra-individual entities but also to individual human beings. It is not clear how the suggestion that Hegel abandons the human perspective for the cosmic one can be reconciled with these kinds of texts.

Finally, it is worth noting that the inference from the fact that Hegel often attributes freedom to *Geist* to the conclusion that he is not concerned with human freedom is based on a misunderstanding of Hegel's theory of *Geist*. Although this is certainly not a misunderstanding that Taylor is guilty of, it is common enough amongst non-specialists to deserve some comment. One of the longest and most accessible discussions of *Geist* in Hegel's social philosophy can be found in the Introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (*VG* 54–61/47–53; cf. *VPR18* 205). There Hegel makes it clear that *Geist* can assume three quite different kinds of shapes: he refers to *Geist* when it 'assumes the shape of a human individual' (*VG* 56/48; cf. *VG* 58/50–1; *VPR19* 214), to the *Geist* of a people or nation (*Volksgeist*) (*VG* 59/51), and to the *Weltgeist* (which he closely associates with Absolute *Geist* and with God) (*VG* 60/52).²⁸ This account suggests that, even when Hegel does attribute freedom to *Geist*—and not explicitly to individual human beings—he may still have the freedom of human individuals in mind: for the individual human being is one shape or form that *Geist* can take. In fact, in the passage from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* to which I am referring, Hegel illustrates most of his propositions about the freedom of *Geist* by discussing quite explicitly the freedom of the individual human being (*VG* 54–5/47–8).

Moreover, even when Hegel is not directly referring to *Geist* as it 'assumes the shape of a human individual', his claims about *Geist* may still presuppose certain claims about human freedom. This is because of the systematic relationships and connections that Hegel sees between the different shapes that *Geist* can assume. As we shall see in Chapter 4 of this study, he holds that an individual can develop the capacities, attitudes, self-understandings, and so on that make him 'spiritual' (*geistig*) only in the context of a community of

²⁷ e.g. *PR* §258; *VPR18* 205; *VPR19* 226; *VG* 111/93–4.

²⁸ Excellent discussions of Hegel's conception of *Geist* can be found in Taylor, *Hegel*, ch. 3 and pp. 378–93, and in Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy*, 43–52.

mutually recognizing individuals. One way of putting this would be to say that it is only in a certain form of *Volksgeist* that *Geist* as individual can be developed and sustained: it is only in the context of a public culture of freedom, one in which certain ideas, practices, and self-understandings prevail, that the capacities for individual free and rational agency can be fostered and nourished. Hegel also holds that a *Volksgeist* is able to achieve a certain level of freedom only in virtue of a particular historical inheritance. A public culture of freedom does not create itself *ex nihilo* but is always, at least in part, the product of a historical process of development that draws on previous cultures and ways of living (Hegel talks of ‘a progression, growth and succession from one national principle to another’ (VG 65/56; cf. 69–73/60–3)). Hegel’s thesis here, then, is that it is only in the context of a certain level of progress on the part of the *Weltgeist* that any particular *Volksgeist* can develop and sustain itself. So, *Geist* as individual can be developed and sustained only in the context of a certain form of collective *Geist*, and the collective *Geist*, in turn, is determined as it is only in virtue of being a product of the labour of history or *Weltgeist*.

The lines of dependence run in the other direction as well. The *Weltgeist* is able to progress and achieve freedom and self-understanding only through the particular *Volksgeister* in which it manifests itself: they are the indispensable vehicles of its self-realization (‘The *Volksgeister* are the links [*die Glieder*] in the process whereby *Geist* arrives at free recognition of itself’ (VG 64/55)). A *Volksgeist*, in turn, can be established and maintained only to the extent that the various ideas, values, practices, and so on that give it shape are expressed and reinforced in the everyday actions and attitudes of particular individuals.²⁹ It is thus only when *Geist* as individual is free that a *Volksgeist* can be free; and it is only through a free *Volksgeist* that the *Weltgeist* can become free. Hegel summarizes this relationship by noting that ‘the end of the *Weltgeist* is realized in substance through the freedom of each individual’ (VG 64/55).

The implication of these various relationships and connections between the different shapes that *Geist* can assume is that it is hardly surprising that Hegel is often unspecific about which of *Geist*’s shapes he is referring to on any particular occasion. To be talking of

²⁹ For discussion of the senses in which human beings are the ‘vehicles’ of their *Volksgeist*’s and of Absolute *Geist*’s self-realization, see Taylor, *Hegel*, 89–94, and Hardimon, *Hegel’s Social Philosophy*, 49–52.

Geist in any of its three major senses is, in general, for Hegel, already to be talking about it in the other two senses. Hegel brings two of these three major senses together in his famous *Phenomenology* definition of *Geist* as ‘this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: “I” that is “We” and “We” that is “I”’ (*Ph.G.* 145/110). Free individuals are, on the whole, the product of a public culture, or collective practice, of freedom, and such a culture is, in turn, the product of a process of historical development. Conversely, the *Weltgeist* achieves freedom and self-understanding only through particular peoples and national cultures, and these, in turn, rely on the freedom of particular individuals for their own success and flourishing.

The upshot of this is that it would be a serious mistake to think that Hegel denies the possibility of full or rational freedom to individual human beings. Even when he does attribute freedom to *Geist*, he has human freedom in mind either directly or indirectly: directly to the extent that the human individual is one shape that *Geist* can assume; indirectly to the extent that the freedom of *Geist* in its supra-individual senses can be realized only through the freedom of individual human beings.

(ii) *Enjoying Freedom as a Vehicle of God’s Self-Realization*

One possible reason, then, for thinking that Hegel’s metaphysics of ‘cosmic spirit’ is indispensable to his view of freedom and *Sittlichkeit* rests on the assumption that the main agent of true or rational freedom in Hegel’s social philosophy is not the individual human being but cosmic spirit. Against this view, I have been arguing that, although Hegel does think that *Geist* can assume a supra-individual shape, and he may occasionally attribute freedom to *Geist* in this form, he also attributes freedom to ordinary human individuals participating in the *Sittlichkeit* of their community. To this extent, the metaphysical reading of Hegel’s project fails fully to resolve the problem at hand: it does not tell us how to understand the intersection between participation in *Sittlichkeit* and individual freedom.

However, the argument that a metaphysical notion of spirit is central to Hegel’s theory of freedom can take a second, more powerful, form as well—again prominent in Taylor’s writings on Hegel. In many passages, Taylor’s argument is not that human beings are (for

Hegel) incapable of attaining rational freedom. Rather, it is that they can do so—but only by coming to see themselves as the indispensable vehicles of cosmic spirit's, or God's, self-realization. Taylor writes, for instance, that

human rational will finds a content not by stripping itself of all particularity in the attempt to attain a freedom and universality which can only be formal, but by discovering its links to cosmic reason, and hence coming to discern what aspects of our lives as particular beings reflect the truly concrete universal which is the Idea. What reason and freedom enjoin on man's will is to further and sustain that structure of things which so reveals itself to be the adequate expression of the Idea.³⁰

In Taylor's view, freedom, for Hegel, consists in following one's true or essential purposes rather than being carried away by one's inauthentic desires and inclinations. As we saw earlier, this raises the question, which Hegel himself poses so forcefully against Kant, of what ends and purposes an agent can be said to have once he has abstracted from all of his given desires and inclinations. Taylor's argument here is that Hegel's solution involves an appeal to the doctrine of cosmic spirit and, in particular, to the idea that the 'essence' or 'basic identity' of man is to be a vehicle of cosmic spirit.³¹ Since the essence of man is to be a vehicle of cosmic spirit, and human freedom consists in realizing one's essence, freedom can be said to consist in furthering and sustaining the purposes of cosmic reason (the 'idea'). There is an ineliminable metaphysical dimension to Hegel's theory of freedom, then, because it is the doctrine of cosmic spirit that provides content for freedom: it is this doctrine that allows Hegel both to endorse the Kantian view of freedom as rational self-determination and yet to perceive so clearly the potential for vacuity that is inherent in this view. Without its metaphysical dimension, Hegel's theory of freedom becomes every bit as vacuous as the Kantian view that Hegel so strongly criticizes.³²

As Taylor himself points out, this reading of the theory leaves Hegel's position looking pretty unattractive: 'where Hegel does make a substantial claim which is not easy to grant is in his basic ontological view, that man is the vehicle of cosmic spirit, and the

³⁰ Taylor, *Hegel*, 373–4; see also p. 72.

³¹ See *ibid.* 44, 92, for the claims that the 'basic identity' and 'essence' of man is to serve cosmic spirit.

³² Some textual evidence for this interpretation can be found at *VG* 127–8/107, *VPG* 524–6/442–4, and *VPR* 17 42.

corollary, that the state expresses the underlying formula of necessity by which this spirit posits the world.³³ Here Taylor points to two distinct problems with the argument. The first is with Hegel's assumption that the essence or basic identity of a human being is to be a vehicle of cosmic spirit. This assumption might be challenged on a number of grounds. It might be objected: (a) that human beings have no essence or basic identity at all; (b) that there is no such thing as cosmic spirit, or at least nothing that remotely resembles Hegel's cosmic spirit; or (c) that, even if human beings do have an essence, and even if there is a cosmic spirit, the human essence has nothing to do with being a vehicle for cosmic spirit.³⁴

The second problem to which Taylor draws attention relates to the claim that freedom is most fully realized through participation in the *Sittlichkeit* of one's community and, in particular, through citizenship in the state. The problem is that this claim is not really explained or justified by the view that freedom consists in realizing one's essence as a vehicle of cosmic spirit. It is unclear why we should think that it is inherent in the ends and purposes of cosmic spirit that agents should participate in the *Sittlichkeit* of their community or be good citizens of their state. Even if it is conceded that God necessarily realizes himself through a community of human agents, it does not follow (as Taylor seems to recognize in the passage quoted above) that that community must resemble the one described by Hegel in his discussion of *Sittlichkeit*: that it must contain the family, civil society, and the state; that agents must think of themselves as members rather than isolated individuals; that they must recognize certain other-regarding virtues and duties; and so on.³⁵ Why would God not be satisfied with the more individualistic communities described in 'Abstract Right' or 'Morality' (Parts 1 and 2 of the *Philosophy of Right*)? Why is the 'thick' sense of community that characterizes *Sittlichkeit* necessary for God's self-realization? If Taylor's interpretation is correct, then it seems that there is a serious gap in Hegel's defence of the claim that freedom is most fully achieved in this way.

³³ Taylor, *Hegel*, 387.

³⁴ It might also be objected that freedom has nothing to do with the realization of one's 'essence'. I discuss the senses in which Hegel's conception of freedom does and does not presuppose such a view in §2.5 (ii) below.

³⁵ These features of Hegel's account of *Sittlichkeit* are discussed in Chapter 6 below.

These difficulties should at least give us a strong *motive* to look for an alternative, possibly complementary, reading of Hegel's position. It is worth investigating whether Hegel's theory can be understood at another, less metaphysical level before attributing to him a view that seems so vulnerable to obvious objections. Moreover, Taylor's second criticism of Hegel might be seen as a weakness in Taylor's interpretation rather than a problem with Hegel's own position. That freedom is most fully realized through participation in the *Sittlichkeit* of a community and, in particular, in the state is one of Hegel's most important and distinctive claims. If the most adequate interpretation of a text is the one that can make best overall sense of that text as a whole and, in particular, can account for as many of the moves and transitions in the argument as possible, then it seems that an adequate interpretation of Hegel's theory of freedom should be able to explain why he thinks that freedom is realized in this particular form of social world and not some other. But, as Taylor implicitly concedes, his reading cannot do this. It remains unclear why it is integral to the plans and purposes of God (the 'idea') that human beings should belong to an ethical community and be good citizens of the state rather than participating in a more individualistic form of social life. Taylor treats this as a problem in Hegel's argument, but, if an alternative interpretation can be found that can better illuminate Hegel's position here, then this would seem to suggest that it is Taylor's interpretation that is incomplete or problematic.

A defender of the metaphysical interpretation might try to fill in this gap in the argument in one of three ways. First, it could be argued that the ways of God are essentially unknowable and transcendent (even 'mystical') and thus the objection is looking for something that simply cannot be provided: the proposition that God realizes himself through human *Sittlichkeit*, and the attendant implications for human freedom, are not fully transparent to the human intellect.³⁶ This view, however, seems fundamentally unHegelian: it ignores Hegel's commitment to providing his contemporaries with a *rational* reconciliation to their natural and social worlds.³⁷ A second approach would be to argue for the claim that God realizes himself

³⁶ Marx charges Hegel with 'logical, pantheistic mysticism' in *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'* (p. 7). Another of Hegel's famous interpreters, Kierkegaard, makes essentially the opposite charge in *Fear and Trembling*, where the argument is that Hegelian philosophy fails to leave enough room for transcendence and faith.

³⁷ For a good discussion of this commitment in Hegel's thought, see Plant, *Hegel*, ch. 8.

through modern *Sittlichkeit* by presenting this mode of God's self-realization as a rational response to, and resolution of, the inadequacies and insufficiencies of historically previous attempts by God to realize himself through other forms of community. Finally, a third approach might start from Hegel's assertion that 'the end of the *Weltgeist* is realized in substance through the freedom of each individual' (*VG* 64/55) and argue that God most fully realizes himself through modern *Sittlichkeit* because this is the context in which human beings most fully achieve freedom.

The interesting thing about the second and third ways of filling the gap in the metaphysical interpretation is that they point *beyond* the metaphysical story to some complementary historical and/or self-actualization story. The preceding remarks do not indicate, then, that the metaphysical interpretation is incorrect—still less that there is no metaphysical dimension to Hegel's thought. They do suggest, however, that the metaphysical interpretation is unlikely to provide the whole story. To understand fully Hegel's position on the intersection between freedom and modern *Sittlichkeit* it is necessary to turn to the historicist and/or self-actualization readings for assistance.

1.5. *The Historicist Reading*

Let us look, then, at what assistance a historicist reading has to offer. The most sophisticated recent attempt to defend such a reading can be found in a series of books and articles by Robert Pippin.³⁸ For Pippin, a major problem in Hegel interpretation is to understand why Hegel holds that a good, worthy, and free life involves participating in various modern social institutions and adopting and affirming the central modern social roles.³⁹ In the same vein as Taylor, Pippin argues that to a great extent Hegel accepts a conception of freedom as rational self-determination inherited from Rousseau, Kant, and Fichte. On this view, freedom is opposed to stopping at anything that is merely 'given' or 'positive' and is realized when the subject acts on reasons that are truly 'his own'.⁴⁰ The

³⁸ e.g. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism, Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* and *Idealism as Modernism*.

³⁹ Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism*, 92.

⁴⁰ Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 64–72, and *Idealism as Modernism*, 97–104.

problem, as Pippin sees it, is to understand why, in participating in modern social institutions (in acting on what Pippin calls ‘ethical reasons’), an agent is satisfying this self-determination requirement. The problem is seriously complicated by the fact that Hegel so forcefully rejects Kant’s apparently similar conception of freedom as empty. Like Taylor, then, Pippin seeks to explain how Hegel can both clearly perceive the potential for vacuity threatened by the conception of freedom as rational self-determination and at the same time make such strong claims about the freedom that is achieved in the ethical life.

Hegel’s solution, Pippin thinks, is to invoke a ‘historical notion of rationality’.⁴¹ According to Pippin, Hegel denies that there are any universal, transcendental standards, or ‘ultimate regulative ideals’, to give content to rational self-determination and instead argues for a view of rationality as embedded in the concrete practices and shared understandings of a community at a particular moment in its history:

Hegel has proposed a conception of rationality . . . that is *essentially* social and historical, rather than rule governed, or only ideally communal, or social and historical in ‘application’ only. What I am doing in identifying what is rationally required for me, for my own self-determination, is appealing to what would be required for any concretely represented agent, and thereby representing *what has come to count* as essential to a historical community as indispensable to such agency (e.g. voting, choosing my own spouse) versus what is marginal or insignificant.⁴²

Pippin argues that this move to a historical idea of rationality helps to explain why Hegel takes freedom to be most fully achieved in participating in modern social institutions and in affirming modern social roles:

it means that Hegel thinks he can show that one never ‘determines oneself’ simply as a ‘person’ or agent, but always as a member of a historical ethical institution, as a family member, or participant in civil society, or citizen, and that it is only in terms of such concrete institutions that one can formulate some substantive universal end, something concretely relevant to all other such agents.⁴³

⁴¹ Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism*, 127.

⁴² *Ibid.* 126 (emphasis in original). See also *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 68–73, and ‘Idealism and Agency in Kant and Hegel’, 541.

⁴³ Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 73.

Pippin is anxious to avoid the suggestion that this account of self-determination amounts to a retreat to an uncritical form of conventionalism.⁴⁴ To say that something counts as a reason simply because ‘that is the way things are done around here’ not only risks lapsing into an uncritical acceptance of the status quo but, as I argued above (§ 1.3), plainly reintroduces the very element of ‘given-ness’ or ‘positivity’ that Hegel’s theory is designed to overcome. On Pippin’s reading, what gives ethical reasons their standing (what makes them *reasons*) for Hegel is not the fact that they are generally accepted but the fact that they are the product of a rational, historical process—what Pippin terms a ‘collective, progressive, self-determination’ of spirit.⁴⁵ It is because a community that makes certain demands on its members can be understood as part of a narrative in which it provides the solution to ‘determinate insufficiencies of prior attempts at self-understanding and self-legitimation’ that those demands take on the character of *reasons*.⁴⁶ Thus, for Pippin, Hegel ‘does not believe that we can formulate the content of . . . a universal law except by reference to the history of ethical institutions, the history of what we have come to regard as counting as universal, as what all others would or could accept as a maxim’.⁴⁷

I take it that Pippin is not merely claiming that history, in Hegel’s view, is rational. It is clear that Hegel does hold *this* view: history, as he argues at length in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, exhibits a progressive logic involving a series of ever more successful attempts to actualize freedom and reason. It is only in the modern, ‘Germanic’ phase of history that ‘concrete’ or full Hegelian freedom (subjective + objective freedom) is realized in a stable and self-reproducing way. The claim that history is rational, however, in no way implies that reason or rationality is historical—if this is taken to mean something about the criteria and standards of rational argument, about the kinds of moves and inferences that are considered legitimate in rational deliberation, its baseline assumptions, and so forth. It is possible that Hegel holds that freedom and reason, understood in some independent, non-historical or foundationalist way, are progressively realized in ever more adequate ways as history unfolds.

⁴⁴ Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism*, 106–9.

⁴⁵ Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 69. For a similar suggestion, see Walsh, *Hegelian Ethics*, 47, 54.

⁴⁶ Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 69 (cf. p. 68).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 72.

I mention this because I suspect that some of Hegel's readers might be tempted to agree with Pippin's proposal that Hegel endorses a historical notion of rationality on the basis of textual considerations that really only support the attribution to Hegel of a rational view of history. Against this temptation, it should be acknowledged that it is possible to recognize a very significant connection between history and rationality in Hegel's thought (that is, the second of these views) and still look to a self-actualization account of why freedom is realized through modern *Sittlichkeit*. Having said this, I think it is pretty clear that Pippin does not confuse the two claims and that he wants to attribute the first view to Hegel and not just the second. How plausible, then, is Pippin's interpretation?

Before addressing this question, one final distinction is needed, this time between two ways in which the thought that reason is historical might be at work in Hegel's social philosophy. One view might be that the modern concept of freedom itself—the concept analysed and developed in the *Philosophy of Right*—is the standard or criterion that is warranted by a rational, historical narrative. Freedom so conceived has come to count for us moderns as the most important value or standard, and, if someone were to question it, no foundationalist or externalist response could be given: we could only give a reconstruction of the historical narrative in which this standard came to be regarded as central, a narrative in which the adoption of this standard can be viewed as a response to, and resolution of, insufficiencies and inadequacies of previous standards. I can think of very little explicit textual support for attributing this view to Hegel, but it certainly sounds very Hegelian.⁴⁸ Note, however, that, whatever the merits of this interpretative proposal might be, it does not yet help to explain the intersection between freedom and modern *Sittlichkeit* insisted upon by Hegel. The proposal historicizes the value of freedom, and thus gestures at the kinds of responses one might make to someone who is sceptical about that value, but it does not tell us why freedom so understood is most fully achieved through participation in modern *Sittlichkeit*: it does not tell us how ethical duties are to be derived from this idea of freedom. So, on this proposal, an appeal to some complementary self-actualization (or meta-physical) story turns out, once again, to be necessary.

⁴⁸ Harry Brod argues that this is Hegel's view in *Hegel's Philosophy of Politics*, ch. 2.

The other way in which the thought that reason is historical might be at work in Hegel's position—the view I think Pippin has in mind—does seek to explain this relationship between freedom and modern *Sittlichkeit*. On this view, the historicized notion of rationality works to warrant not just the concept of freedom itself but also the content of freedom—the ends, duties, and virtues that are seen as proper to, or expressive of, free and rational agency. The claim that freedom is achieved through modern *Sittlichkeit*, then, amounts to the claim that the duties and virtues of modern *Sittlichkeit* are what have come to count as good reasons for us moderns and have a certain rational, historical superiority *vis-à-vis* previous attempts to formulate good reasons.

Unlike the first view, this reading does not seem to rely on a complementary self-actualization or metaphysical account for assistance in exploring the intersection between freedom and modern *Sittlichkeit*. There are, however, several difficulties with reading Hegel's position in this way to which I want to draw attention, if only to highlight the advantages of the interpretation to be developed in this study. One difficulty is that the proposed interpretation fits only awkwardly with the structure and programmatic statements of the *Philosophy of Right* and associated lectures. A second is that the proposal does not fully eliminate the element of 'given-ness' or 'positivity' that, as Pippin himself emphasizes, Hegel is concerned to divorce from freedom. Let us look at these two points more closely.

We can begin by observing that, in the absence of further argument, there is no reason to think that Pippin's distinction between a timeless rationality of universal standards and a historical, social rationality would coincide with any distinction between ordinary, private ends of individuals (where Hegel denies they are fully free) and ones that involve participation in social institutions or affirming social roles. Indeed, it seems plausible to think that the customary morality, or *Sittlichkeit*, of our modern societies has become increasingly individualistic and privatistic, so that what now counts as a good reason for us often does not involve entering into, or sustaining, relationships with others but instead consists in 'doing our own thing'. Thus, even if Pippin is right to think that Hegel favours a purely social and historical conception of rationality, this does not explain why Hegel thinks that freedom is most fully realized in the form of ethical life described in the *Philosophy of Right*: there is a gap in the argument between the thin sense of community involved in

recognizing that all reasons are ultimately social and historical in character (even the most individualistic libertarian could concede this) and the thick sense of community affirmed by Hegel that involves actively participating in, and supporting, relationships of community with others (for example, in one's family, corporation, or state).

Pippin seems to recognize this gap in the argument when he says that,

Hegel thinks he has . . . identified what social functions have come to be essential in modernity to [self-determination] (here his most controversial claim: that modern societies require wholly new sorts of legal relations among private individuals, or 'civil society', as well as a genuinely public life, a common identification or citizenship in the state, and that these realizations of freedom are not inconsistent, but continuous, even require each other).⁴⁹

But it is not clear where, in Pippin's view, the defence of these claims is supposed to be given or how this statement of Hegel's claims is meant to map onto the argument of the *Philosophy of Right* (or associated lectures). Presumably, the argument should have two parts to it. It should, first of all, involve a kind of cultural interpretation, which investigates our language, practices, art, and so forth, to find out what sorts of reasons and considerations have 'come to count as essential' for our historical community. Secondly, it should have a historical part to it, which demonstrates that these reasons and considerations are not *merely* 'the way things are done around here' but provide some kind of resolution to the inadequacies and insufficiencies of the past and are in this sense the product of the 'labour of spirit'. The problem for Pippin's reading is that neither sort of argument is obviously given in the *Philosophy of Right*. In particular, Hegel makes it pretty clear in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right* that the argument to follow will not be historical in character:

To consider the emergence and development of determinations of right *as they appear in time is a purely historical task*. This task . . . is meritorious and praiseworthy within its own sphere, and bears no relation to the philosophical approach—unless, that is to say, development from historical grounds is confused with development from the concept, and the significance of historical explanation and justification is extended to include a justification which is *valid in and for itself* . . . Since it has now been shown that the historical

⁴⁹ Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism*, 126–7.

significance of origins, along with their historical demonstration and exposition, belongs to a different sphere from the philosophical view of the same origins and of the concept of the thing, the two approaches can to that extent remain indifferent to one another. (*PR* §3; cf. *VPR18* 205–6)⁵⁰

But, if the historical dimension of the argument for the rationality of modern *Sittlichkeit* is not found in the *Philosophy of Right* (or associated lectures), then it is not clear where else it is to be found. Perhaps it is Pippin's view that Hegel does not actually provide such an argument anywhere but simply *lays out* the ends, duties, and virtues that he thinks qualify as rational in the appropriate sense. But this proposal would seem to conflict with Hegel's claim to be developing the duties and virtues of modern *Sittlichkeit* from the 'idea of freedom' (*PR* §148).

So one difficulty with Pippin's position as I am now construing it is that it does not seem to map onto the structure or stated ambitions of the *Philosophy of Right* in any straightforward way. At the very least, more needs to be done to connect the proposed characterization of Hegel's programme with the detailed argumentation found in his published texts and recorded lectures. The second difficulty with Pippin's reading can be stated more briefly. As we have seen, Pippin thinks that reasons 'which have come to count as essential to a historical community' have standing if and only if they can be shown to result from a rational, historical process in which they respond to previous determinations that have revealed themselves to be inadequate or insufficient. On the basis of this formulation, it might be wondered how much is contributed by the fact that the process in question is *historical*, rather than, say, a series of thought experiments, and how much is contributed by the fact that it is *rational*. The problem with emphasizing the fact that the process is historical—that its various stages and determinations actually happened—is that this seems to reintroduce an element of 'positivity' and 'given-ness' into the justification of present duties and arrangements.⁵¹ If the fact that 'this is the way things are done around here' does not on its own count as a decisive reason for me to continue to do them that way,

⁵⁰ Hegel also insists that the order of topics discussed in the *Philosophy of Right* is not historical (*PR* §§32, A, 182A).

⁵¹ Terry Pinkard (*Hegel's Phenomenology*, 11) makes a similar point about historical interpretations of Hegel's philosophical system, although he then goes on to emphasize the historical character of the *Phenomenology* as well as the later philosophy of right.

then why should the superiority of our practices to the way in which, say, the ancient Greeks happened to do them be any more decisive?⁵²

An alternative would be to place the emphasis on the fact that the process in question is a rational one. The idea here would be to show that the set of reasons and duties that has come to count as essential to a historical community can be systematically developed from an initial situation that is itself in some sense necessary and rational. This process of development may have a rough correspondence with history (and a knowledge of history is likely to be extremely helpful in reconstructing it), but it is possible to present it ‘logically’, as a series of thought experiments, and it is not ultimately dependent on whether certain historical events and transformations actually occurred or not. This view, I think, is broadly accurate as a characterization of Hegel’s position and is compatible with the reading to be developed in this study. Understood one way, it is a view in which a self-actualization story figures prominently in explaining the intersection between freedom and modern *Sittlichkeit* in Hegel’s thought.

1.6. *The Civic Humanist Reading*

The present study will defend a variant of the self-actualization interpretation. This means that it will look for ways in which the philosophical warranting of modern *Sittlichkeit* involves the demonstration that modern institutions and practices promote, or provide the locus for, human self-actualization. For reasons to be explained below, I call the variant of this view that I shall be defending the civic humanist reading. Clearly, the details and textual basis for this reading will have to be reserved for the main body of the study, as they connect, directly or indirectly, with many of the central issues in Hegel’s social philosophy. But having devoted a number of pages to suggesting that alternative interpretations are incomplete or unsatisfactory, it seems appropriate to give at least a preliminary indication of the position to be defended here.

A good place to start is with Hegel’s important distinction between

⁵² One way of testing the contribution made by history to the reasons-for-action we now have would be to ask whether those reasons would change if we suddenly discovered that our understanding of some historical period (e.g. the Greeks) was badly mistaken.

‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ freedom (see §2.1 below). Roughly speaking, an agent (or ‘will’) enjoys subjective freedom to the extent that he reflects on, and is able to find some subjective satisfaction in, his actions and relationships (his ‘determinations’). He enjoys objective freedom, by contrast, to the extent that his determinations are prescribed by reason: they are the determinations to which a fully rational agent, in the circumstances, would be committed. The subjectively free agent, then, is the agent who stands back from his determinations, reflects on them critically and independently, and is able both to endorse them and to find some subjective satisfaction in them. The objectively free agent, on the other hand, is the agent who, quite independently of whether he engages in reflection, has the correct determinations—the determinations that are prescribed by reason. The fully free agent—the agent who enjoys what Hegel terms ‘concrete’ or ‘absolute’ freedom—is free in both the subjective and the objective senses. His determinations are ‘his own’ both in the subjective sense that they are grounded in his reflectively endorsed commitments and evaluations *and* in the objective sense that they are prescribed by reason.

Hegel claims that agents enjoy both subjective and objective freedom in modern *Sittlichkeit* and therefore attain concrete freedom in that context. As we shall see, he attributes subjective freedom to individuals in modern *Sittlichkeit* for three different reasons (see §6.4 below). One is that modern *Sittlichkeit* works in various ways to develop and maintain the capacities and attitudes associated with subjective freedom. A second reason is that modern *Sittlichkeit* respects and promotes spheres of choice for individuals where they can exercise their subjective freedom. And a third reason for attributing subjective freedom to agents in modern *Sittlichkeit* is that he thinks that modern institutions such as the family, civil society, and the state have become central to the identity and outlook of such agents. These institutions have been internalized into the subjective evaluations and commitments of modern agents in such a way that, upon reflection, they are likely both to be endorsed for the right kinds of reasons and to provide subjective satisfaction to their members.

Hegel’s reasons for attributing objective freedom to agents in modern *Sittlichkeit* are more difficult to discern. On the view to be developed in this study, they can be reduced to two main propositions (see §§3.4, 6.4 below):

- (1) An agent enjoys objective freedom when his determinations contribute to the realization of a community in which subjective freedom is fostered and protected.
- (2) The determinations defined by modern *Sittlichkeit* contribute to the realization of a community in which subjective freedom is fostered and protected.

Combining (1) and (2) it follows that objective freedom is realized through participation in modern *Sittlichkeit*.

Proposition (1) will be developed and given a textual basis in Chapters 2 and 3 below. The central cluster of ideas underlying (1) might be set out as follows. The paradigmatic case of unfreedom, for Hegel (as for his Enlightenment predecessors), is acting on the basis of another's authority (see §2.4 below). When I act on another's authority—for instance, the authority of a priest or a spiritual adviser—then I am letting someone else's judgement determine for me what I could think through and decide for myself on the basis of my own reason. In a similar way, there is a conflict between freedom and allowing one's given desires and inclinations to count as authoritative reasons for action. To be free in my practical deliberations means not to accept any contingently 'given' authority, tradition, or desire as decisive when I could subject it to scrutiny and perhaps reject it in favour of some different consideration.

As we have already seen in considering the interpretations developed by Taylor and Pippin, this picture of freedom quickly gives rise to a suspicion of vacuity. If, in order to count as fully free, an agent cannot consider as primary any authority or tradition of the community in which he lives, or any desire or inclination that he experiences, then what kind of reason-for-action *can* he appeal to in his practical deliberations? Hegel's answer, I argue, involves the thought that even a radically reflective agent is committed to at least one end: the end of developing, expressing, and maintaining his own freedom. The act of stepping back from, and scrutinizing, all of one's given attachments, desires, and so forth presupposes a commitment to at least this end (see §3.5 below). This is part of what Hegel has in mind when he talks of 'the free will which wills the free will' (*PR* §27).

This suggestion about the content of freedom fits neatly with an intuition that I suspect many people would share: that struggling against oppressive conditions is not merely instrumental to the realization of freedom but is itself one of the prime ways of realizing or

expressing one's freedom. Hegel is, of course, not terribly interested in legitimating revolutionary activity (much as he admires certain 'revolutionary' figures such as Socrates, Jesus, and Luther) but is more concerned with the kinds of freedom that agents can enjoy in reasonably well-ordered and non-oppressive societies (see §1.3 above). Still, he does not want to abandon altogether this intuition that freedom is realized through the struggle against oppressive conditions that pose a danger to it. He thinks that a whole series of activities—from obeying the law, to the deliberations of public officials, to going to war—can potentially be viewed as part of the organic process in which a free society sustains and reproduces itself through, as he puts it in one passage, 'a constant negation of all that threatens to destroy freedom' (*VG* 55/48).

This brings us to proposition (2), which is developed and furnished with textual support in Chapters 4–6 below. The argument here has two central strands. One is that the capacities and self-understandings involved in subjective freedom—the capacities for reflection, analysis, and self-discipline, the sense of oneself as a free and independent agent—can be reliably developed and sustained only in the context of certain social institutions and practices. In particular, in Hegel's view, institutions such as property and contract, that work to mediate the attraction and expression of mutual recognition, must be in place for these capacities to be fully developed and sustained.

The second strand involves the thought that a social world containing the institutions and practices that work to develop and maintain subjective freedom may not be stable and self-reproducing unless the agents who inhabit it are disposed to act in certain ways. If Hegel is right to think that such a world necessarily includes the institutions of property and contract, for instance, then agents must be disposed to accept the burdens and sacrifices involved in respecting the property of others and abiding by their contracts. Hegel's basic claim about modern *Sittlichkeit* is that it alone provides the dispositions that make possible a social world hospitable to subjective freedom. Modern *Sittlichkeit* contributes to the realization of subjective freedom, because a community containing the family, civil society, and the state is the minimum self-sufficient institutional structure in which agents can develop, maintain, and exercise the capacities and attitudes involved with subjective freedom. The underlying idea is that a social order can tolerate a high degree of individual independence and subjectivity if and only if its citizens are

members of ethical institutions that imbue them with goals, values, and convictions such that, when they freely consult their own evaluations and commitments about how to act, the answers they arrive at reinforce that order rather than weakening or destabilizing it.

So, on the view being proposed here, the idea of freedom intersects with modern *Sittlichkeit* in two different ways. Modern *Sittlichkeit* realizes subjective freedom in the three different senses noted above. It realizes objective freedom because, given the way in which it works to realize subjective freedom, agents who adopt its duties and virtues are working to secure the conditions of their own freedom. Since agents enjoy both subjective and objective freedom through participation in modern *Sittlichkeit*, they are fully or ‘concretely’ free in that context.

For three different reasons, I want to propose ‘civic humanist’ as an appropriate label to describe this interpretation. The first is that the reading being proposed is clearly a ‘humanist’ one. As I will explain in a moment, the proposal is consistent with recognizing a significant role for God in Hegel’s social philosophy, but it does not itself rest on the view that God is the agent of, or provider of content for, freedom. Instead, it seeks to explain the sense in which individual human beings achieve freedom through participation in modern *Sittlichkeit*, and it does this by exploring the conditions of human subjectivity.

A second reason for using the label ‘civic humanist’ to characterize Hegel’s position is that it emphasizes his idea that the highest practical good for human beings involves participation in community with others and, in particular, leading the life of the good citizen. Practical freedom, for Hegel, is most fully and paradigmatically achieved through *civic* activities and dispositions. It is in adopting the ends and dispositions of a good member of one’s community that one helps to advance an end to which one is committed just in virtue of being a free and reflective agent: one helps to develop and preserve the conditions of one’s own freedom.

The third reason for proposing this label is that, on the interpretation being suggested, there are certain important philosophical and sociological themes that Hegel’s position shares in common with thinkers in the civic humanist tradition. One common theme is the idea that a social order hospitable to freedom is a fragile accomplishment that is prone to corruption and collapse because of the individualism, indifference, and neglect of its citizens. A second is the

idea that, in the light of this tendency, the success and maintenance of such an order require that certain objective and subjective conditions be in place. The objective conditions include the rule of law, the division of political authority into separate but interlocking spheres of responsibility, mechanisms to ensure the accountability of public officials, and an emphasis on public education. The subjective conditions centre on the idea that citizens must be animated by certain dispositions and virtues if the institutions of their freedom are to be guaranteed: they must be animated, to at least some degree, by what Montesquieu famously described as ‘a continuous preference for the public interest over one’s own’.⁵³ Putting all this together, we can say that, for Hegel, as for civic humanists, a free society is a fragile construction that can be sustained only if certain institutional structures are in place—structures that, among other things, ensure that citizens are not entirely devoted to their own private affairs but are sufficiently disposed to act for the good of others, including the good of the community as a whole.

To avoid misunderstanding, let me emphasize that the label ‘civic humanist’ is meant to suggest a *philosophical affinity* between Hegel’s idea of freedom and certain themes that are often associated with the civic humanist tradition. I am not making a claim about *influences* on the development of Hegel’s thought nor am I claiming that Hegel himself *belongs to* the civic humanist tradition.⁵⁴ It is clear that there are a number of themes in Hegel’s thought that are *not* standardly associated with civic humanism. For instance, he quite explicitly denies that civic life is the highest good, claiming only that it is the highest *practical* good. Human beings can achieve a higher form of liberation, according to Hegel, in the *contemplative* spheres of art, religion, and philosophy (*Enz.* iii, §§553–77; *Aesthetics* 99–100; *VPR17* 189–90). Moreover, in contrast to views frequently associated with civic humanism, Hegel has a marked preference for large over small states and argues strongly that the monarchy is one of the essential elements in an institutional structure hospitable to freedom. And, perhaps most importantly, Hegel is considerably less enthusiastic about *active* political participation for ordinary citizens than many civic humanists, preferring to emphasize other ways in which the activities and dispositions of ordinary citizens are important for

⁵³ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 36.

⁵⁴ Laurence Dickey (*Hegel*, 227–30) offers a brief but more historically minded discussion of Hegel and the civic humanist tradition.

the maintenance of a free society. I also want to avoid, if possible, taking a firm stand on complex, and much contested, historical questions concerning the essential features of the civic humanist tradition, its origins and chief proponents, its identity or otherwise with the ‘republican’ tradition in political thought, and so forth.⁵⁵ Even acknowledging the controversy surrounding these issues, and recognizing the ways in which Hegel departs from civic humanism, I think there is enough philosophical affinity between Hegel’s idea of freedom and themes that are widely associated with the civic humanist tradition that the label is not misleading but, in fact, helps to situate Hegel’s position on freedom and community in a range of philosophical possibilities.⁵⁶

1.7. *Converging Perspectives*

Let me conclude, then, with a few remarks on the relationship between the civic humanist reading to be defended in this study and the four kinds of interpretation introduced in §1.2 above: the conventionalist, metaphysical, historicist, and self-actualization readings. The relationship with the last of these readings is the most straightforward, since, as I have suggested in a number of places, I consider the civic humanist reading to be a variant of the self-actualization view. The self-actualization view claims that Hegel seeks to give a rational warrant for existing practices and institutions (he seeks to ‘reconcile’ us to the present) by showing how those practices and institutions work to promote, or provide the locus for, human self-actualization. The civic humanist reading offers an explanation of why Hegel might have attributed this property to the institutions and practices of modern *Sittlichkeit*. A social world incorporating modern *Sittlichkeit* constitutes the minimum self-sufficient social structure that is able to actualize and sustain the capacities and attitudes involved in subjective freedom and facilitate the exercise and expression of these capacities and attitudes. It is thus through parti-

⁵⁵ A classic study of the civic humanist tradition in political thought is Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (see especially ch. III). See also Quentin Skinner’s writings on Machiavelli and the republican tradition—e.g. his contributions to Bock, Skinner, and Viroli (eds.), *Machiavelli and Republicanism*.

⁵⁶ For recent philosophical discussions of civic humanism, see e.g. Taylor, ‘Cross-Purposes’, ‘Hegel’s Ambiguous Legacy’, ‘Kant’s Theory of Freedom’, and *Sources of the Self* (p. 196); and John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 205–6.

icipation in modern *Sittlichkeit* that individuals are able to realize subjective, objective, and, hence, concrete freedom.

The civic humanist reading shares in common with the conventionalist view the idea that the *everyday* practical reasoning of agents has as its content the duties and virtues of modern *Sittlichkeit*. In most practical contexts, it is appropriate for agents to decide what to do on the basis of the duties and virtues embedded in the family, civil society, and the state, together with their own subjective desires and ambitions. It differs from the conventionalist reading, however, on the question of whether it is possible, in Hegel's view, to adopt a standpoint of philosophical reflection that abstracts from the duties and virtues embedded in existing institutions and practices and looks for a rational warrant for those institutions and practices themselves. The conventionalist reading insists that there is no such external standpoint for Hegel, whereas the civic humanist view being proposed here argues that Hegel's ambition is to reconcile us to modern institutions and practices by demonstrating how they work to develop and maintain human freedom. Thus, in contrast to the conventionalist view, the civic humanist view points to a way of prioritizing the duties and virtues embedded in different institutions and practices (and thus helps to explain Hegel's insistence that the state take priority over the family and civil society) and it provides some reassurance, or 'reconciliation', for those who are struck by the apparent conservative implications of Hegel's views on *Sittlichkeit* and practical reason.

The civic humanist reading shares with the metaphysical view the idea that Hegel is committed to giving a rational warrant for existing institutions and practices through philosophical reflection. But the two views understand this process of warranting in quite different ways: whereas the metaphysical reading sees God as playing a pivotal role in the warranting narrative, the civic humanist view confines itself to claims about human subjectivity and its conditions. Having marked this difference, however, it is open to the advocate of the civic humanist reading to recognize a very significant metaphysical dimension in Hegel's social philosophy. It is consistent with the civic humanist interpretation to say, for instance, that God achieves freedom through modern *Sittlichkeit* because the freedom of the individual depends on modern *Sittlichkeit* and 'the end of the *Weltgeist* is realized in substance through the freedom of each individual' (VG 64/55). Following on from this point, the civic humanist view can

also allow that the individual committed to the duties and virtues of modern *Sittlichkeit* can think of his ends and dispositions as rational, not just in the sense that they contribute to the realization of a community that makes his own freedom possible, but also in the sense that they contribute to the realization of a community through which God expresses and realizes himself. Finally, the civic humanist reading is compatible with the suggestion that modern *Sittlichkeit* enables the flourishing of certain contemplative modes of relating to God: it enables the freedoms enjoyed in the spheres of art, religion, and philosophy (*VG* 113/95, 124–5/104–5).

Most complex of all, perhaps, is the relationship between the civic humanist and historicist readings. The two readings share the view that it is possible to step outside existing institutions and practices in order to provide them with some rational warrant that can reconcile us to them. However, whereas the civic humanist interpretation locates this reconciliation in a claim about human freedom and the institutional conditions of its full actualization, the historicist reading (on at least one construal) emphasizes the ways in which modern institutions and practices are meant to resolve various problems and insufficiencies of historically earlier forms of community. Having said this, the civic humanist reading is in no way obliged to ignore historical themes that obviously are present in Hegel's thought, nor is it incompatible with one quite plausible way of reading a historicist story into Hegel's position. It need not deny the obvious truth that, for Hegel, history is rational and it is plainly consistent with Hegel's view that objective and subjective freedom appear at different historical stages and are jointly realized only in the modern European, or 'Germanic', world. Finally, the civic humanist reading is also compatible with the thought that the Hegelian view of freedom itself can ultimately be warranted only by reference to a historical narrative that draws out the ways in which freedom so conceived responds to and resolves the tensions in earlier attempts to formulate a foundational value. The civic humanist interpretation does not suggest a justification of freedom itself but only seeks to explain why Hegel posits an intersection between freedom as he understands it and participation in modern *Sittlichkeit*.