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HEGEL'S ALTERNATIVE TO NATIONALISM

ABSTRACT: *All of the major German Idealists perceived a gap between ideals and social reality. Kant sought to bridge this gap through an institutional design that forced self-interest to track the public good. Fichte embraced cultural nationalism, according to which, to overcome the gap between ideals and reality, a nation must revive and strengthen its original culture. Hegel's solution, in contrast, rests on the idea of ethical habituation. For Hegel, the institutions of a well-designed social order encourage the habits and virtues needed for the successful reproduction of that order. The article reflects on the implications of these contrasts for the prospects of liberal democracy.*

Keywords: *cultural nationalism; ethical habituation; German Idealism; Fichte; Hegel.*

The fifty-year period from the publication of Kant's *First Critique* (1781) to the death of Hegel (1831) was a remarkable one in the history of political philosophy. The major works of the German Idealists were written against the backdrop of the French Revolution, the expansion of commercial society, the consolidation of the modern state, and the rise of nationalism. Even works of theoretical philosophy in this era were filled with references to normative and political ideas, such as freedom, recognition, history, and revolution.

While German thinkers of the period were confident about the revolutionary importance of their ideas, they were also painfully aware of a

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gap between the exhilarating ideals they announced and the reality of their contemporary world. They all drew attention to this gap, even if they were frequently guarded, for political reasons, about elaborating their criticisms of the status quo. At the same time, they wrestled with the more or less practical problem of how their ideals might be realized and sustained.

In the context of his political philosophy, Kant drew attention to the gap very explicitly in a famous passage of his 1795 essay, "Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Project." After laying out three "articles" for perpetual peace, Kant turned to the question of what could serve as a "guarantee of perpetual peace" (Kant [1795] 1996, 331). How does nature ensure, Kant asked, that human beings in fact do what their own reason commands them freely to do (*ibid.*, 334)? The problem seems particularly pressing in the context of the republican form of government favored by Kant, which is said to be especially difficult to establish and preserve: "many assert it would have to be a state of *angels* because human beings, with their self-seeking inclinations, would not be capable of such a sublime form of constitution" (*ibid.*, 335).

Kant's view was that the problem and its solution could be found in the same place. The problem is selfishness, or what he called "self-seeking inclinations" (*selbststüchtige Neigungen*), but these same inclinations also point to the solution:

But now nature comes to the aid of the general will grounded in reason, revered but impotent in practice, and does so precisely through those self-seeking inclinations, so that it is a matter only of a good organization of a state (which is certainly within the capacity of human beings), of arranging those forces of nature in opposition to one another in such a way that one checks the destructive effect of the other or cancels it, so that the result for reason turns out as if neither of them existed at all and the human being is constrained to become a good citizen even if not a morally good human being. (*Ibid.*)

Kant drew here on a well-established eighteenth-century doctrine of political theory embraced by Mandeville, Montesquieu, Hume, Adam Smith, and James Madison, among others. Through clever institutional design, the selfishly pursued power of one political actor could be made to check and contain the equally selfish power of another. Though everyone is acting on the basis of their own selfish interest, the public good emerges. Thus, Kant thought it possible to organize a

good state “even for a nation of devils.” The solution consists in establishing a constitution in such a way that, “although in their private dispositions they strive against one another, these yet so check one another that in their public conduct the result is the same as if they had no such evil dispositions” (ibid.). This solution requires not “the moral improvement of human beings” but a comprehension of what Kant calls the “mechanism of nature,” a mechanism that does not depend on “inner morality” but rather works “through self-seeking inclinations that naturally counteract one another” (ibid., 335–36).

In this article, I consider the views of two of the leading philosophers of the period who rejected Kant’s 1795 position on this problem. Fichte and Hegel agreed with Kant that correct institutional design is a *part* of the solution. This was a position held by almost every political thinker of the period. Kant’s theory of a good will notwithstanding, nobody expected individuals to in fact follow the dictates of morality simply because they are right, and without any intervention or motivation by institutions. Moreover, Hegel recognized a sphere of human activity—civil society—in which “the selfish end” (*der selbstsüchtige Zweck*) “establishes a system of all-round interdependence” that aligns the welfare of the individual with “the subsistence, welfare, and rights of all” (Hegel [1821] 1991, para. 183). However, as a general solution to the problem, both Fichte and Hegel rejected Kant’s “invisible-hand” theory that well-designed institutions could be made to direct and channel selfishly motivated actions so that their combined, unintended result is to produce the public good.

Fichte and Hegel departed from Kant’s solution for several reasons. First, as Fichte explained most fully, the invisible-hand solution seems importantly incomplete (Fichte [1808] 2008, 88–90). No system of checks and balances is self-creating or completely self-maintaining. “What compels your final part,” Fichte wondered, “in which all compulsion in the machine originates?” How “do you mean to set this mainspring in motion and compel it to see and will what is right without exception?” It seems that an invisible-hand solution faces a dilemma. Either it is unreliable or it is incomplete. It is unreliable insofar as the officials who establish and oversee the institutions that constitute it, and ensure that they continue to direct and channel selfish activity in the appropriate way, are assumed to be selfishly motivated. If they are selfishly motivated, then it is a matter of pure contingency whether these officials will fulfil their responsibilities as required. Alternatively, the

assumption could be that officials are motivated in some other way, with a moral purpose that directs them to fulfill their responsibilities. But then the solution is incomplete. It does not give an account of how officials develop the assumed moral sensibilities.

A second objection to Kant's solution is that it conflicts with freedom. Although Kant characterized his solution as being "without prejudice to ... freedom" (Kant [1795] 1996, 334), Fichte and Hegel believed otherwise. The solution works only to the extent that institutions constrain individuals to direct their selfish energies in publicly beneficial ways. Each individual must, as Fichte put it, be "compelled ... against his wish and will, to promote the general good" (Fichte [1808] 2008, 88). For Hegel, as noted above, civil society is the sphere in which "the principle of particularity passes over into *universality*." But the unity between these principles in civil society, he insisted, "is not present as freedom" (Hegel [1821] 1991, para. 186). For both Fichte and Hegel, full political freedom consists, in part, in individuals spontaneously embracing the public good as their own end.

Although these objections could be explored further, I mainly want to devote the present article to exploring two alternative solutions presented by Fichte and Hegel for bridging the gap between political ideals and social reality. These solutions are importantly different. The one I will attribute to Fichte embraces *cultural nationalism* as its central component. To bridge the gap between ideals and social reality, a nation must have an appropriate form of background culture, and it must actively encourage individuals to embrace this culture, express it, and preserve it. By contrast, Hegel's solution is built around the idea of *ethical habituation*. On Hegel's view, the institutions of a well-designed social order will tend to encourage the formation of the habits, dispositions, and virtues needed for the success and reproduction of that order. For Hegel, the key to bridging the gap between ideals and social reality is to recognize that modern societies already have, in their existing "ethical life," many of the elements they need to support well-ordered freedom. Bridging the gap, then, is not a matter of looking for, or contriving, some wholly new source of motivation. Rather, it means nourishing and supporting the ethical tendencies that are already latent in existing practices and institutions, while avoiding the entrenchment of highly subjective and/or individualistic normative principles that corrode those practices and institutions.

The disagreement between these two approaches is relevant to several important contemporary debates.

One concerns nationalism. The suggestion that attachment to culture and nation can provide a source of trust and solidarity needed for the success of modern states is an enduring one, often repeated by today's philosophical defenders of nationalism (e.g., Miller 1995, 90–99; idem 2000, ch. 4). Fichte articulates an early formulation of this claim, while Hegel points to an alternative.

A second, related debate is about the universality of the political ideals—liberty, equality, fraternity—associated with the French Revolution. As we shall see, Fichte's argument seems to imply that the realization of these ideals is only possible for some peoples: those with the appropriate cultural background. While Hegel seemed to think that Europeans were in the vanguard of realizing freedom, and while he held chauvinistic and, indeed, racist views about the character of non-European peoples, his theory of ethical habituation implies that, in principle at least, any people can establish self-sustaining institutions of freedom.

Finally, a third debate concerns the fate of modern liberalism. Conservatives have long argued that liberalism, with its emphasis on freedom and markets, fails to guarantee the social conditions of its own persistence.¹ According to many conservatives, liberals are disdainful towards religion, which is in fact the bedrock guarantor of a stable set of protections for personal freedom. Fichte's account of nationalism—another object of liberal skepticism—is similar: by criticizing nationalist politics, liberals risk sawing off the very branch they are sitting on. The implications of Hegel's position are rather different. From a Hegelian perspective, liberalism can take an extreme individualist form, which pays insufficient attention to the role that institutions, practices, and communities play in ethical habituation. But taking seriously this role does not require liberals to abandon their values and principles. There is, then, a second, “social” version of liberalism (as I shall call it) that fosters ethical habituation without sacrificing freedom.

Fichte's Cultural Nationalism

Born in 1762, Fichte was a fairly young man at the moment of the French Revolution. Enthused by the events in France, he published a book, *Contribution to the Rectification of the Public's Judgment of the French Revolution*, that helped to establish his reputation as a political radical. He developed

his political theory further in *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796–97), which drew on his Idealist philosophical system to argue for a republican, egalitarian, and activist view of the ideal state. In the early years of the 1800s he extended his philosophical system into an account of the philosophy of history. He argued that the present age was characterized by a willingness to question external authority, but still fell short of history’s final destination, which would consist in a fully justified social order.

The Fichte text that I want to focus on here, the *Addresses to the German Nation*, elaborates a very specific account of how the German people might lead humanity into this final era. The *Addresses* were presented and published in Berlin in 1807–1808, while the city was under occupation by Napoleonic France. The opening pages capture the mood of despair and catastrophe shared by Fichte and his Berlin audience and readers. Under the present circumstances, Fichte proclaimed, “only the glory of obedience is left” (Fichte [1808] 2008, 10). Germans, he added, “face the downfall of [their] nation” unless they can “avoid giving themselves over entirely to the feeling of pain at the loss they have suffered” (ibid., 11).

Fichte described Germany’s predicament as arising from one of the characteristic impulses of the age, which, echoing Kant, he called “selfishness” (*die Selbstsucht*) (ibid., 9). Selfishness has developed itself to its “highest degree” when, “after it has captured, with only a few exceptions, the totality of those ruled, it then takes possession of the rulers also and becomes their sole impulse in life.” Without loyalty, duty, honor, or courage, “the commonwealth goes under with the first serious attack launched against it” (ibid., 14).

For “such a sunken nation ... to be able to save itself,” Fichte then went on to argue, there must be “the creation of an entirely new order of things” (ibid., 15). The new order imagined by Fichte must be a new *moral* order. Germans must be shaken out of their selfish degradation and made to embrace and love the good for its own sake. In this way, a “completely new self” (ibid., 17) must be cultivated that is attached to morality and the commonwealth for their own sakes. A new form of education is needed that will succeed in “making its vision of a moral world so vivid that the pupil is seized by ardent love and longing for it.” As Fichte added a little later on, “We must therefore replace this self-love, which can no longer be connected with anything that is good for us, with another kind of love, one that aims directly at the good, simply as

such and for its own sake, and plant it in the minds of all those whom we wish to reckon among our nation” (ibid., 25).

If the general direction of Fichte’s thinking is familiar here, the next move in his argument is not. He argued that, despite its present predicament, the German people are peculiarly well-suited for this moral transformation. The reason lies in the linguistic and cultural character of the Germans. The distinctive trait of the Germans, according to Fichte, is that they retained their *original* language. This means that a crucial resource for moral regeneration remains close at hand. Other peoples—such as the French—borrowed heavily from a foreign language (Latin) and thereby cut themselves off from their own original language, and so from an important source of moral transformation.

Influenced by Herder, but contrary to the received wisdom, Fichte did not think of language as a pattern of arbitrary conventions. Instead he claimed that “there exists ... a fundamental law according to which each concept is expressed by this sound and no other through the human speech organs” (ibid., 49). Linguistic diversity is not evidence of the conventional nature of language but of the ways in which the one original language of humanity was formed and modified by the varying environmental and historical conditions facing different groups of language users. Indeed, a distinct nation or people (*Volk*), for Fichte, is not understood in ethnic or racial terms, but as a group of people, extended through time, who live together, who develop in continuous communication, and whose speech is subject to the same external influences (ibid., 50).²

The non-arbitrary character of language, as Fichte saw it, has great moral significance. The original language of a people is an immediate expression of its common life. It designates objects in a way that is directly influenced by the senses, and that expresses the moral and aesthetic reactions of the language community. As an original language builds up an abstract (or what Fichte terms “supersensuous” [ibid., 51]) vocabulary, it relies on the “sensuous” part of the language—the language used to designate objects of the senses. The moral terminology of a people that has retained its original language thus has the immediate, evocative power and clarity of lived experience. As Fichte put it,

since language is not the product of arbitrary arrangement but breaks forth as an immediate force of nature from rational life, a language that has continued to develop without interruption ... also has the power to intervene

directly in life and stimulate it. As things immediately present to man move him, so too must the words of such a language move him who understands it, for they also are things and by no means arbitrary contrivances. (*Ibid.*, 53)

In this way, peoples that retain their original language—peoples in the “higher sense of the word”—can be said to produce themselves (i.e. their rational and moral nature) out of themselves (i.e. their original formative sphere of intuitions and experiences) (*ibid.*, 103).

Contrast this with a people that ends up borrowing its abstract vocabulary from another, higher-status language and culture. Fichte was especially thinking of the French here, who borrowed extensively from Latin, but the pattern is true of many European languages. The systematic borrowing of supersensuous vocabulary introduces a rupture between the language of sense and immediate experience, on the one hand, and the language of thought and moral action, on the other. The discourse of morality becomes little more than a lifeless language game. “The most they can do is have the symbol and its spiritual meaning explained to them, whereby they receive only the flat and lifeless history of an alien culture but not a culture of their own, and get images which for them are neither immediately clear nor a vital stimulus, but which must seem to them as entirely arbitrary” (*ibid.*, 54). While this abstract language was living and meaningful for the people that originally formed it—e.g., the Romans in the case of Latin—when borrowed by a later people, it is little more than “an incoherent collection of arbitrary and utterly inexplicable signs of equally arbitrary concepts; and nothing else can be done with either sign or concept beyond simply learning them” (*ibid.*, 57). A borrowed language with this character requires blind trust in experts and authorities, and leads to class inequality between those who have and have not mastered the appropriate language games (*ibid.*, 65–66).

Fichte’s argument was most clearly directed at his fellow Germans. Long dominated by an aristocratic class infatuated with French culture and language, Fichte’s recipe for moral regeneration called on Germans to reject the cultural domination of the French and to revive and re-energize their own cultural heritage. Although not without foreign borrowings, Fichte believed that German remained enough of an original, “living” language that, with concerted effort from a national education program, it could build a national culture rooted in its original language.

Ultimately, then, Fichte's solution to the gap between moral ideals and social reality is a nationalist program of reviving, developing, and celebrating the original language and culture of the people. Fichte was confident that a return to its cultural and linguistic roots would bring out the earthy morality of simplicity, loyalty, earnestness, and spirituality he associated with the German common people. Upon that solid foundation, Fichte thought that the German Idealist philosophy of freedom could articulate and sustain a rational state that realizes something like the principles of the French Revolution that he admired.

Hegel's Alternative

Born in 1770, Hegel was also an ardent enthusiast for the French Revolution, in his case from the safe distance of his student quarters in Tübingen (Pinkard 2000, 22–26). Although never a radical political thinker like Fichte, Hegel remained committed to the principles of the Revolution throughout his life, once telling a contemporary that he annually drank a toast to the storming of the Bastille on its July 14th anniversary (ibid., 451). Hegel was certainly conservative in many respects, but his political theory never rejects or seeks to replace “the right of *subjective freedom*,” which he characterized as “the pivotal and focal point in the difference between *antiquity* and the *modern age*” (Hegel [1821] 1991, para. 124). Instead, the central concern of his political philosophy is with how to *consolidate* a political order defined around the value of freedom. Regimes committed to freedom risk descending into anarchy—as happened in France's Terror—or giving way to an authoritarian like Bonaparte. Hegel thought that the central problem of political philosophy was how to articulate a social order that was at once hospitable to freedom and stable and self-reproducing.

This consolidation problem is at the heart of Hegel's main work of social and political philosophy, *The Philosophy of Right*. Most of the book is devoted to elaborating an account of “objective right,” which is Hegel's term for the institutions, practices, and conditions that are needed for freedom to be “actualized”—that is, to be given an effective social reality. In this respect, Hegel's political philosophy is centrally concerned with overcoming the gap identified by Kant between normative principles and social reality. Adding to the difficulty of Hegel's account, this task of identifying the conditions that actualize freedom also involves an exposition of what freedom is. For Hegel, the true nature of freedom is

best discovered in the very process of working out the conditions that realize freedom effectively in the social world.

Like all of Hegel's arguments, his account of the conditions that actualize freedom proceeds in a dialectical fashion.³ He starts with an extremely minimal conception of what freedom is and of which objective conditions would need to be present in order for freedom in that sense to be realized in the world. Any plausible conception of freedom would need to include this initial minimal element, and in that sense it is indispensable. But Hegel then goes on to argue that the minimal conception, together with the objective conditions that realize it, are self-undermining. The successful exercise of freedom, understood in this minimal way, works eventually to undermine the objective conditions that are necessary for freedom's continued realization. Hegel thus characterizes this initial, minimal structure of freedom as lacking "self-sufficiency" and "independence" (e.g., Hegel [1821] 1991, para. 32A).

If freedom is to be actualized, then a richer conception of freedom and its conditions is needed, one that supersedes without completely canceling the initial minimal conception. This richer conception is then subjected to the same dialectical examination. Hegel argues that its very success will bring about its own downfall, so some further enrichment is needed. And so on. The result, if Hegel can carry it out, is a rich and highly differentiated conception both of what freedom is and of the world of social institutions and practices that are needed to give it social reality. In contrast with the early abstract stages, which lack self-sufficiency, the final result is compared with a living organism that is able to reproduce itself continuously (*ibid.*, paras. 146, 267–69). The ongoing reproduction of a social order is never guaranteed, but a healthy organism does not actively encourage its own demise and instead is able to withstand a range of shocks and setbacks.

A crucial thing to appreciate about Hegel's project in the *Philosophy of Right*, then, is how thoroughly it is committed to bridging the gap between normative ideal and social reality. What makes the initial conception of freedom considered at the outset insufficient is that it cannot form part of a stable and self-reproducing social order. An adequate account of freedom is one that does not merely announce an attractive ideal but also demonstrates how that ideal can form part of an organic, self-supporting social structure.

The first step in this complex argument is laid out in Part I of the *Philosophy of Right*, "Abstract Right." Here Hegel starts with a very minimal

notion of free agency, which he terms “personality.” To be a free person, very roughly, is to recognize that one is confronted with a given set of circumstances but, at the same time, that one is independent of those circumstances, that they do not necessarily prescribe a specific action or way of being. It is, in effect, to think of oneself as a maker of choices, capable of imposing one’s own will onto a given situation.

Hegel argues that the institutions of private property and contract are needed to realize this minimal conception in the world. Through property, individuals develop and solidify a sense of themselves as agents whose choices make a difference in the world. And through contract they express their recognition of one another as possessing this capacity. But as the account of Abstract Right progresses, Hegel brings out a contradiction lurking in the initial attempt to characterize freedom and its actualization (*ibid.*, paras. 81–82). On the one hand, the institutions needed to realize the minimal conception of freedom—property and contract—rely for their success on a general respect for property, a disposition to keep contracts, and so on. On the other hand, the bare idea of agents as choosers does not say anything about the particular *content* of their choices. As choosers, they might act in ways that support property and contract, but just as possibly they might not. The minimal world of Abstract Right fails to guarantee the conditions of its own success and stability.

There is much more that could be said about this first step in Hegel’s argument, but already we can see Hegel’s concern with bridging the gap between the ideal and the social reality of freedom. Hegel’s concern is that a system that merely encourages independent personality has potentially destabilizing consequences for established institutions and practices, including the very institutions and practices that are needed to develop and express the capacity for personality itself. This is a problem that Hegel thinks was first encountered by the ancient Greeks. He describes the pre-Socratic Greeks as enjoying a harmonious social existence in which they habitually fulfilled the tasks and functions that protected their social order and caused it to reproduce itself. It was only when the Sophists introduced the principle of independent thought, and this principle gradually permeated Greek culture, that the reproduction of the social order was jeopardized (*ibid.*, 20, para. 185). When individuals began to consult their own convictions about what to do rather than reflexively following the customs and conventions of their community, their willingness to take on the burdens and sacrifices needed for the

community's continuation could no longer be relied on. Hegel read Plato's *Republic* somewhat idiosyncratically as a profoundly conservative attempt to describe what a community would have to do (among other things, ban private property, occupational choice, and the family) in order to re-establish a stable community by *fending off* the emergence of the principle of free personality.

Hegel's own project, however, was not to find ways of stifling individuality and free personality. Plato's attempt to "exclude particularity" and the "inherently infinite personality of the individual" was "of no help" because it "contradict[ed] the infinite right of the Idea to allow particularity its freedom," a right whose discovery Hegel credits to Christianity (*ibid.*, paras. 185, 185A). Instead, Hegel was concerned to identify the features of the modern world that allow for a stable and self-sustaining realization of individual personality and subjectivity. It is possible to read the remainder of the *Philosophy of Right* as an attempt to develop a solution to the contradiction set up by property and contract. Property and contract are necessary moments in the development of freedom, but on their own they are self-undermining, and so some further articulation of the nature and conditions of freedom is needed.

One way of preventing personal choices from undermining property and contract would be to punish coercively those who make such choices. Hegel is sympathetic to such a response. Punishment protects the validity of right by negating the negation implicit in the wrongdoer's actions (*ibid.*, para. 97A). But Hegel did not think that punishment and coercion are sufficient, on their own, to stabilize the structure of freedom depicted in "Abstract Right." Who would be the judge of wrongdoing or of the appropriate punishment to be applied to those identified as wrongdoers? Without a convincing answer, there is nothing to distinguish legitimate retribution from revenge (*ibid.*, para. 102). Judgments about wrongdoing should be made by somebody with integrity, impartiality, and fair-mindedness: they require "a justice freed from subjective interest ... and from the contingency of power" (*ibid.*, para. 103). But these concepts are alien to the limited world of Abstract Right. Agents in Abstract Right are assumed to be free persons, and not necessarily to possess the inner depths of someone who acts for certain kinds of reasons and refuses to act for others. The sphere of right is characterized by "immediacy," meaning that an agent's choices are not mediated by reflection or moral reasoning. "Justice is therefore altogether contingent" (*ibid.*, para. 102).

Implicit in this argument is a rebuke of the political theories developed by both Kant and Fichte in the 1790s. These theories were geared around the protection of free and independent persons who set and pursue their own ends. Kant and Fichte recognized the need for coercion and, indeed, for a public authority that settles disputes, resolves indeterminacies, and protects the vulnerable. But they failed to explain how a public authority could successfully fulfil these functions if it is controlled by officials and citizens who are nothing more than free and independent persons. Kant believed that clever institutional design could offer a way around the need for morally motivated officials and citizens, but as we have seen there are problems with this solution.

Part II of the *Philosophy of Right*, “Morality,” is the book’s first main attempt to identify conditions that would consolidate the initial progress made in Abstract Right. Hegel’s proposal is that the problem of stabilizing the freedom introduced in Abstract Right could be solved if agents possess not just personality—the capacity for choice—but also subjectivity. The subject wills ends that are distinctively his own. He has purposes, intentions, and a conscience, and he is free only to the extent that his actions reflect and express these commitments. Hegel’s thought is that, if the fundamental self-understanding and disposition of individuals is not just one of free personhood but also revolves around willing certain specific ends, or having certain motives, then the contradiction afflicting Abstract Right can be resolved. Again, this is compatible with the observation that what is needed at the end of Abstract Right is a judge of some sort who has integrity, impartiality, and so on.

By the end of Morality, however, Hegel has concluded that while morality and subjectivity are a necessary part of the resolution to the contradiction, they are not the complete solution. Morality fails to guarantee that individuals will find in their consciences the commitments that are needed to stabilize the structure of Abstract Right. They may or may not. Likewise, morality cannot guarantee that individuals will be disposed to follow their consciences rather than pursuing their own personal interests and satisfaction. So morality faces both a problem of content and a problem of motivation. There is no guarantee that moral reasoning will leave subjects with the right ends, and even if they have the right ends there is nothing inherent in morality that explains why they would be motivated to follow them. In morality, as in Abstract Right, it is entirely contingent whether individuals will have the ends and motives needed to secure the development of freedom. For this reason,

Hegel describes morality as “the indeterminate which *ought* to be determined” (ibid., para. 141). Morality is no more able to bridge the gap between ideal and social reality than Abstract Right.

Hegel’s argument for these claims only becomes apparent in Part III of the *Philosophy of Right*, “Ethical Life.” At this stage, agents are conceived of not simply as persons and subjects, but also as *members* of certain social institutions: the family, civil society, and the state. These institutions impose certain duties on those who occupy the roles they define: the duties, for instance, of parents, of colleagues and association members, and of citizens and public officials. They also habituate and socialize their members into having the subjective dispositions to support and affirm these duties. Ethical Life is a sphere of virtue because ethical institutions impose duties on their members (thus, defining content for ethical action) *and* imbue in them an inclination to perform those duties.

Returning, then, to morality, it is apparent that underlying Hegel’s critique is the assumption that individuals’ deepest convictions, values, and motives are shaped by the social practices and institutions in which they participate. The implication of Ethical Life is that, given the “right” social environment, individuals will find the “right” ends in their consciences and the motivation to follow those ends. The problem, however, is that morality, as Hegel understands it, makes no assumptions at all about social practices and institutions (except for property and contract in the background, which introduced the problem in the first place). Morality is, in effect, an attempt to solve the contradiction in an individualistic way that makes no reference to practices or institutions of community with others. For this reason, Hegel claims, morality is bound to fail. Unless certain practices and institutions are in place, which make certain ends salient and habituate people to value them, there is no reason to expect that individuals searching their consciences and considering their motives will end up acting in ways that stabilize the institutional structure established by the argument so far.

The details of Hegel’s accounts of family, civil society, and the state are too complex to explore here. The important general point is that each set of institutions generates a form of *social unity* or *integration* among those who participate: through habituation and socialization, they each encourage their participants to act for the sake of others. The family does so through bonds of love and affection; civil society through relationships of mutual dependency as well as honor, camaraderie, and collegiality;

and the state through participation in, and subjection to, a common framework of deliberation, law, and political action.

The upshot is that Abstract Right and morality describe ideas and institutions that are necessary for freedom but that cannot, by themselves, guarantee their own stability over time. Ethical Life provides the resolution to this contradiction. It describes the social environment in which individuals can safely be left to enjoy the freedoms of personality and subjectivity that are characteristic of the modern world, because that environment reliably habituates individuals into developing other-regarding ends and dispositions. Shaped by the right social environment, individuals can be expected to freely accept the burdens and sacrifices presupposed by a self-reproducing social order that is hospitable to personality and subjectivity. Thus, Hegel bridges the gap between ideal and social reality identified by Kant, but not mainly through a mechanism that aligns self-interest with the public good. That idea does figure in Hegel's account of the "System of Needs" (a subsection of Civil Society), but it is not the general form of Hegel's solution. Rather, Hegel's proposal is to embed the ideal of individual freedom, which he shares with Kant and Fichte, in a supportive social structure that shapes individual ends and motivations in ways that conduce to the common good.

Unlike conservatives who emphasize the destabilizing effects of subjectivity, then, Hegel's conclusion is that a social order *can* tolerate a high degree of independent personality and subjectivity, but *only* if a crucial condition is met. Its citizens must be members of ethical institutions that habituate them into possessing those goals, values, convictions, and so forth, that—when they consult their own opinions and consciences about what to do—lead them to arrive at answers that reinforce that order rather than tearing it apart, as happened (in Hegel's view) in the French Revolution.

Discussion

There are deep dangers in the nationalist approach. Fichte's attitude towards the French was resentful and chauvinistic, while his discussion of the Germans tended towards the nostalgic and uncritical. Although Fichte borrowed many of his ideas from an earlier German thinker, J. G. Herder (1744–1803), there is much less emphasis in Fichte than in Herder on the ways in which peoples learn and benefit from one another.⁴ Altogether, Fichte's nationalism anticipated many of the

dangerous and troubling tendencies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalist movements.

Hegel's views on non-European peoples were racist and contemptuous,⁵ and his conception of history as culminating in the free societies of Europe was comfortably aligned with discourses of European imperialism that became ascendant in the nineteenth century. Unlike Fichte, however, Hegel was not sympathetic with the nationalist movements of his own day. He remained a Francophile throughout his adult life, and associated nationalism with the subjectivist philosophy and anti-Semitic outlook of his rival Jakob Friedrich Fries.⁶ More importantly, there is a strand of argument in Hegel's political philosophy—which I have sought to expound here—that represents an interesting alternative to both Fichtean nationalism and Kant's faith in institutional mechanisms.

If Fichte's view is unappealing, Hegel's can seem a bit too good to be true. For Hegel, the key to bridging the gap between ideals and social reality is to recognize that modern societies already have, in their existing "ethical life," many of the elements they need to support well-ordered freedom. Bridging the gap, then, is not about contriving a new source of motivation, but nourishing and supporting the ethical tendencies that are already latent in existing practices and institutions. No great act of statesmanship or leadership is needed to bring about conditions of freedom. This is one meaning of Hegel's famous—for some, notorious—dictum, in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, that "what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational."

But Hegel's account has some critical bite, and it also points to an agenda for political reformers. Negatively, Hegel meant to warn his readers against political theories that are overly simplistic and abstract. He had in mind the indiscriminate appeals to passion and feeling made by some of his Romantic contemporaries, as well as the reductionist formulas he associated with theorists of the social contract. Positively, Hegel's approach recommends vigilance and care for institutions like the family and the associational life of civil society; and attention to ways in which the political realm of the state integrates all citizens together and sets a tone for the whole society. Isolation and atomism are serious evils for a Hegelian, and belonging, civic virtue, and public service are key values. There is also a critical standard implicit in Hegel's supposition that what matters is not stability *tout court*, but the stability of a social order that is hospitable to modern forms of freedom. Stabilizing the institutions of reactionary monarchy, or of

Napoleonic authoritarianism, would not actualize freedom as Hegel understood it. That would be to bridge the gap between ideals and social reality by giving up on the ideals.

It is true that Fichte nationalism may have considerable appeal in certain contexts. Societies that have long been dominated by colonial or foreign powers have experienced various forms of cultural imperialism. It is tempting to think that what these societies really need in order to flourish is to rediscover and reassert their authentic, original cultures. But the experience of nationalism in Europe should be a cautionary tale. The construction of an authentic national culture often magnifies and reifies longstanding forms of difference in a society. These constructions lead to forms of exclusion and marginalization that end up threatening the very freedom that the nationalist solution is meant to secure.

Moreover, an apparent implication of Fichte's argument is that some societies can *never* hope to realize freedom. Fichte tries to suggest otherwise. Germans should "inaugurate the new age, as pioneers and exemplars for the rest of humanity" (Fichte [1808] 2008, 43), implying that others might follow in their path. But it is not clear that he is entitled to universalize his argument in this way. Some peoples, such as the French, have given up much of their original language, so if Fichte's argument is correct they will never be able to morally reinvent themselves in the way that is needed for freedom. In contrast, the Hegelian model of social liberalism looks capable of traveling to other societies and contexts. It does not emphasize unalterable facts about the background culture, but looks for ways in which the existing institutions and practices of a society work to integrate people and orient them ethically so that leaving space for freedom does not lead to social breakdown.

Finally, we might wonder whether the Hegelian model has anything to say concerning the viability and future of liberalism. As I have suggested, Hegel's model sets itself against overly individualist and reductionist understandings of the values of liberalism. A Hegelian liberalism is one that guards against isolation, atomism, and the breakdown of families and communities. Without sacrificing its core values, this social liberalism might offer distinctive positions on issues like trade, immigration, the decline of unions, and technological innovation, which threaten to disrupt existing communities in ways that leave individuals vulnerable and isolated. In the abstract, it is hard to say whether social liberalism is viable over time, but Hegel's vision remains as relevant as any to the challenges we face today.

NOTES

1. For discussion, and references to the conservative literature, see Bowles 2011.
2. Arash Abizadeh (2005, 351–52) argues for the “crypto-ethnic” character of Fichte’s nationalism. Abizadeh acknowledges Fichte’s explicit denial that the distinguishing characteristic of the German people is its ethnic purity (see Fichte [1808] 2008, 49). But he insists that Fichte’s repeated use of the genealogical language of “descent” (*Abstammung*, *Abkunft*) shows that Fichte was committed after all to an ethnic conception of peoplehood. Abizadeh’s account is impressive, but ultimately I find it unconvincing. A more plausible reading is that Fichte employed the language of ancestry and descent in a sociological rather than a biological sense. Biological ancestry refers to a lineage of biological reproduction, while sociological ancestry refers to a lineage of socialization relations, where earlier generations socialize the next generation, which socializes the next generation, and so on. (For further discussion of this distinction, see Patten 2014, 51–52, 58–59). For Fichte, this sociological lineage is centrally focused on language, and thus he says that the distinguishing characteristic of the German people is not “the prior ancestry of those who continue to speak an original language, but only the fact that this language continues to be spoken without interruption, for men are formed by language far more than language is by men” (Fichte [1808] 2008, 49).
3. The overview of the structure of Hegel’s argument in the *Philosophy of Right* that I offer here and in the next few paragraphs draws on a fuller discussion in Patten 1999, 176–90.
4. For discussion of Herder’s brand of nationalism, see Patten 2010.
5. See, for instance, Hegel [1830] 2007, paras. 393, 393A; and Hegel 1975 Appendix 1, 152–208.
6. For discussion, see Avineri 1962 and Allen Wood’s editor’s notes to Hegel [1821] 1991, 385–86.

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