De Ethica (2026) 9.4:37–53
https://doi.org/10.3384/de-ethica.2001-8819.269437

# Is Hegel's Philosophy an Algebra of Revolution? Rediscovering the Ethical Impulse in Political Philosophy

Eirik Hasvik

*This article examines the paradox at the heart of Hegel's political legacy: how a philosopher often dismissed as an apologist for Prussian conservatism became the intellectual wellspring for radical critique, inspiring revolutionaries from Marx to Bakunin. The key to understanding this tension lies in Hegel's famous Doppelsatz—"what is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational"—which has been interpreted both as justification for the status quo and as a revolutionary call to critique. Through analysis of Hegel's Philosophy of Right and the subsequent split between right and left Hegelians, I argue that Hegel's crucial distinction between mere reality (Realität) and actuality (Wirklichkeit)—what corresponds to its rational essence—opens a critical gap for evaluating existing institutions against rational standards. Rather than relying on Hegel's specific suggestions for a political philosophy, I propose understanding his approach as offering dynamic tools for rational critique that remain vital for contemporary ethical thought. The Doppelsatz signifies not resignation to what exists, but a call to engage critically with reality and reveal how it might become more fully rational and free.*

In 1841, the Prussian authorities summoned Friedrich Schelling to Berlin with an explicit mission: to "stamp out the dragon seed of Hegelian pantheism."[1] Yet by then it was too late. In the audience for Schelling's inaugural lecture sat three young men who would personify the very revolutionary currents Prussia feared: Søren Kierkegaard, Mikhail Bakunin, and Friedrich Engels—progenitors of existentialism, anarchism, and Marxism. How had Hegel, often dismissed as an apologist for Prussian conservatism, become the intellectual wellspring for radical critique? The Russian revolutionary Alexander Herzen captured this paradox when he declared Hegel's dialectics to be "the algebra of revolution"—a fearsome intellectual weapon that "vaporized everything that existed" and left "not one stone upon another of the Christian world."[2]

[1] Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 662.
[2] Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts: The Memoirs of Alexander Herzen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 641-642n11.



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This tension at the heart of Hegel's legacy demands our attention. Was Hegel a conservative philosopher providing philosophical cover for the Prussian state, or was he—perhaps despite himself—articulating principles that would inspire generations of radical reformers and revolutionaries? The question is not merely of historical interest. Today, as we confront profound challenges to democratic institutions, social freedom, and rational discourse, Hegel's political philosophy offers resources we can ill afford to ignore.

The key to understanding Hegel's enduring relevance lies in his famous *Doppelsatz*—his bold declaration that "what is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational."[3] This statement has been interpreted both as a justification for Prussian conservatism and as a source of revolutionary critique. Indeed, the immediate split between the "right" and "left" Hegelians following his death in 1831 attests to the profound tension at the heart of his thought.[4] Rather than reading Hegel as either a reactionary apologist or a revolutionary prophet, I propose we understand his political philosophy as offering dynamic tools for rational critique. I argue that Hegel's philosophy, properly understood, contains a powerful ethical impulse—a commitment to rational critique and social transformation that remains vital for contemporary political thought.[5] This impulse flows from Hegel's crucial distinction between mere "reality" (*Realität*)—what merely exists—and "actuality" (*Wirklichkeit*)—what corresponds to its rational essence. This distinction opens a critical gap between what is and what ought to be, providing grounds for evaluating existing institutions against rational standards.

In what follows, I examine Hegel's political philosophy as developed in the *Philosophy of Right*, tracing how his followers grappled with competing interpretations of his legacy, and explore what his approach offers for contemporary ethical and political thought. My aim is to recover the ethical impulse in Hegel's philosophy—not as a fixed doctrine, but as a living resource for rational critique and social transformation.

**Hegel's Political Philosophy**

*The Philosophy of Right* was first published in 1821, based on a series of lectures Hegel had presented at the universities of Heidelberg and Berlin. This work is not the only one in which Hegel discusses explicit political issues: he commented on contemporary politics throughout his academic career, as seen in his work on "The German Constitution," which he wrote early in his career, and in his "On the English Reform Bill," which he wrote at the very end of his life.[6] Still, the *Philosophy of Right* is by far the most systematic overview of his political ideas—it is concerned with how objective spirit becomes concrete within relations of law, morality, and ethics—and he intended it to fit squarely within his broader philosophical corpus.

[3] G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, edited by Allen W. Wood, translated by H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 20.

[4] The Hegelian movement also fielded a substantial "centrist" tendency, although this position has not attracted the same posterior attention as have the "right" and the "left." See John Edward Toews, *Hegelianism: The Path Toward Dialectical Humanism, 1805-1841* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 71-155, 203-242.

[5] By "impulse" I mean something weaker than a fixed doctrine and stronger than a mere opinion: a standing pressure—rooted, as we will see, in the properly active sense of *Wirklichkeit* itself—that requires any given social order to demonstrate its rational credentials rather than simply persist.

[6] See G.W.F. Hegel, *Political Writings*, edited by Laurence Dickey and H.B. Nisbet, translated by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 6-101, 234-270.

The *Philosophy of Right* pays homage to the promise of subjective freedom, which Hegel regarded as a genuinely progressive feature of modernity. Hegel follows Kant in distinguishing between legality and morality, but he departs radically from how Kantian moral philosophy insists on the personal autonomy of judgment. Kant locates morality within every individual, and, in his opinion, individuals who are free from corrupting influences will be able to make true and proper judgments on their own. Hegel, by contrast, insists that judgments and subjectivity develop in a social context, and without reciprocity or recognition no moral judgments are possible. Kant's autonomous subject is an abstraction and "purely formal," he argues, and it cannot offer any effective criterion or guidelines for evaluating the judgment's content. From early on in his engagement with Kant, Paul Franco writes, Hegel insisted that "the universality of Kantian virtue is always purchased at the expense of particularity."[7] Still, Hegel considers both universal civic rights as well as subjective morality to constitute important steps in the progression from the abstract to the concrete. "The sort of unity Hegel calls concrete is meant to be a 'higher unity,' one that preserves and embraces division, conflict, and otherness."[8]

Hegel's political philosophy can be read as an attempt to situate modern subjectivity within a social ontology, though, as I note below in discussing *Sittlichkeit*, whether Hegel intends anything so systematic as an "ontology" in its strict sense, rather than a theory of ethical agency, is itself disputed, and he introduces the *Philosophy of Right* by discussing the metaphysical basis for free will, which he essentially equates to freedom: If the will is free, then "freedom constitutes its substance and destiny."[9] He dismisses commonplace conceptions of free will as one-sided and incomplete. We ought rather to speak about self-determination than will, he suggests, to convey properly the totality of human freedom. Self-determination, for Hegel, is the process in which human beings articulate their true essence: Human beings *an-sich* already contain freedom, which is the essence of their will. But their will must moreover become freedom *für-sich*, they must express their freedom to the world through their acts, as free human beings. In that sense, to become truly free the will must project an image of human beings as they *should be* and make those values *their own*—only then can individuals actualize freedom *an-und-für sich*. Human self-determination, then, is not based on the "self-dependence" that Kant postulated, but on a reflective social dependence.[10] Society is necessary for human agency because it provides the ethical standards against which individuals can evaluate themselves and their moral judgments. This is not a digression from the essay's main line of argument: the same movement—from implicit possibility, through externalization in action, to a self-conscious and actualized unity—recurs in the *Doppelsatz*, notably in the contested identification of the rational with the actual, discussed below.

Freedom, then, is understood as the unity of the particular self and the social, ethical self: only in and through society can an individual become truly free. But before we can arrive at that conclusion, Hegel guides us through a veritable *Bildungs*-process, where

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[7] Paul Franco, *Hegel's Philosophy of Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 44. See also Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §136-138.

[8] Michael O. Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy: The Project of Reconciliation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 40.

[9] "The abstract concept of the Idea of the will is in general *the free will which wills the free will*." Hegel, *Philosophy of Right,* §27, emphasis in original.

[10] This terminology is Charles Taylor's. See Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 156-61.

we go from the most abstract perceptions of will and rights, to the more elaborate forms of freedom as it is expressed in social relations and in the sovereign state.

Hegel structures the *Philosophy of Right* as a progression through three moments. "Abstract right" is the dawning realm of legality, in which persons attain formal recognition as equals through property, contract, and a shared commitment to lawful coexistence—"the person is the individuality of freedom in pure being-for-itself."[11] "Morality" locates freedom in the rational agent's own judgment: against Kant and Fichte, Hegel insists that conscience develops only because every moral agent is already situated within a social nexus, oriented from the outset within an ethical universe. Finally, Hegel deals with *Sittlichkeit*—usually translated as "ethical life." *Sittlichkeit* denotes the communal context in which ethical attitudes, norms, and customs develop and flourish. *Sittlichkeit*, it should be stressed, is not simply coextensive with "the state": family and civil society are no less its moments than strictly political institutions. The standard rendering of *Sittlichkeit* as "ethical life" can obscure that Hegel's ethics and his political theory, while systematically integrated, are not identical terms. I treat them here as internally related rather than as separate domains, since it is precisely Hegel's refusal to hive political philosophy off from a more general theory of freedom's actualization that grounds the critical potential this essay is tracing. More specifically, his dialectical analysis explains how ethical life expresses itself as individuals find a higher unity in family relations, civil society, and the state. Even in his earlier writings, Hegel had used *Sittlichkeit* to describe the ethical life of the ancient world, notably in the Greek *poleis*, which had a substantial and ethical concept of freedom, while they had no substantial concept of subjectivity, that is, of personal freedom.[12] In fact, the *Philosophy of Right* concludes with a section on how morality (and ethics) has developed through history, and he claims that the highest historical stage expressed itself through the political forms of German culture.[13] Before we dismiss his views as outdated and Eurocentric, which they obviously are, it is worth noting how he sought to integrate civic virtues in political institutions. In the modern world, Hegel argued, it was possible to actualize a synthesis of formal rights, personal morality, and an ethical community; to actualize *personal* freedom and *moral* freedom, as well as *social* freedom. We can characterize Hegel's concept of *Sittlichkeit* as a "realm of actualized freedom."[14] It is important to capture the full meaning of Hegel's description here: As philosopher Frederick Neuhouser points out, "Hegel's claim is not simply that the rational social order brings about the social conditions that make freedom possible; rather, *Sittlichkeit* is itself said to be an actualization, a making real, of freedom."[15]

The *Philosophy of Right* is Hegel's explicit attempt to not only describe the social preconditions for moral agency but also delineate the concrete institutional structures that

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[11] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §35a.

[12] Freedom for the ancient Greeks, Hegel claimed, was "substantial" and "ethical" because the individual found identity through involvement, indeed immersion, in the *polis*. Their will and their actions were shaped by the city's laws and traditions and laws, in marked contrast to modern subjective freedom, which is based on individual self-interest and rational choice.

[13] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §341-360. By German culture, Hegel refers to the modern, Central-European nation-states, not strictly the German territories. Hegel's historical perspective profoundly informs his political theory and is more fully developed in his lectures on the philosophy of history. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of World History*, translated by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1975), particularly pp. 124-151, 194-209.

[14] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §4.

[15] Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 18.

could embody an ethical political order. In contrast to the liberals of his day, Hegel was not fearful of endowing the state and the community with too great powers; in his eyes, individuals in the modern world suffer far greater from social "indeterminacy."[16] Hegel's political project has been defined as an attempt to counter the "pathologies of individual freedom."[17] To complement and fulfill the modern promise of subjective freedom, Hegel argues, society must provide a rational institutional and cultural framework that individuals can understand and identify with. Hegel is very explicit about what he considers rational social institutions: they are intelligible structures in which an individual can "be at home," that is, whose values can be comprehended, internalized, and harmonized with the demands of subjectivity and personal freedom. He identifies this with how a person's individual self-worth is transcended in familial love, how personal material interests can be collectively transcended through civic (*Bürgherlichen*) corporations and estates, and how personal political engagement is transcended through Hegel's prescriptions of what is essentially a modern nation-state.[18] The state is necessary, Hegel explains, because "the destiny of individuals is to lead a universal life."[19]

It is helpful here to take the historical predicament of Prussia and the German territories in Hegel's time into account: a state whose progressive reform movement Hegel was sympathetic to, but whose absolutist, monarchical structure sat uneasily beside the constitutional advances of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. As we will see later, the *Philosophy of Right* was often interpreted as accommodationist and conservative, if not outright subservient to Prussian absolutism. Indeed, the *Philosophy of Right* should be interpreted within its historical context, something Hegel himself predicted when he wrote his memorable lines: "When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk."[20] In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel is at great pains to distance himself from utopianism and political radicalism. The ethical social order he envisions is not simply philosophical musings over how society "ought to be": quite to the contrary, Hegel insists any "ought" must be anchored in the historical realities and the political traditions of a given culture.[21] Attempts to change the state according to pure reason or universal moralism are patently dangerous, he warns. No man can "leap over Rhodes" or step outside of history; the best we can hope for is to philosophically grasp our "shape of life." As every individual is a child of his time,

[16] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §4-8. This analysis is furthered by modern communitarians. See, for example, Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, pp. 154-69.
[17] A pivotal problem for Hegelian politics, Honneth claims, is Hegel's urge to compensate for these pathologies by the "over-institutionalization" of "ethical life." Axel Honneth, *The Pathologies of Social Freedom: Hegel's Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 63-80.
[18] To be sure, the nature of the Hegelian state is contested. Despite its authoritarian ring at times, it can also be associated with a liberal, republican state. In a pioneering study, Shlomo Avineri contributed to the reappraisal of Hegel's political aspirations; in this work he associates Hegel, broadly speaking, with social democracy. See Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972).
[19] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §258r.
[20] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 23.
[21] In response to this, philosopher Rebecca Comay wryly comments that "The task of philosophy is to mark the anachronism of the present-day," For Hegel, "Actuality (*Verwirklichung*) in this sense can mean nothing other than the *deactivation* of the existent and the reactivation and reenactment (of every sense) of the thwarted futures of the past." Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 143-145.

Hegel memorably claims, "philosophy, too, is *its own time comprehended in thoughts*."[22] Even if we accept Hegel's conclusion here, the perennial question remains whether we as individuals simply ought to reconcile ourselves with our social destiny or whether our rationality can pose demands on the social order. This question, as we shall see, was to torment Hegel's followers. The fracture that followed is not merely of biographical interest. It is the historical proof that the ambiguity built into the *Doppelsatz* carried real political stakes, and not only interpretive ones: each faction inherited the same formula and drew opposite institutional conclusions from it.

**Hegelianism—and its splintering**

When Hegel accepted a prominent university position in Berlin in 1818, his philosophical prestige was second to none: The "beginnings of the 1820s saw Hegel's philosophy increasingly establishing itself in Prussia as something like the official philosophy of state, with a monopoly of influence essentially guaranteed by the continued favor and support of the government."[23] But his influential, indeed revered, position was a precarious one.

At the time of Hegel's death, on November 14th, 1831, the Hegelian movement immediately began to disintegrate, as leading disciples "began to fight among themselves and even with Hegel's sons about the meaning of Hegel's legacy."[24] Because of these conflicts, the very possibility of a comprehensive and consistent philosophical system seemed increasingly illusory, and Hegel's reputation quickly plummeted. To be sure, this disintegration was not only because of internal disagreements but also because of the remarkable rise of the natural sciences, which made Hegel's attempt to categorize the totality of natural knowledge within the bounds of anything like an "encyclopedia of the philosophical sciences" quaint. Eventually, "Hegel's authority simply and quickly evaporated" from Prussian universities.[25] At any rate, Horst Althaus adds, "as far as the University and its students at least were concerned, the times themselves had long since begun to overtake Hegel."[26]

Still, it is not correct to assume that petty personal squabbles caused the dissensus and disintegration, nor that broader historical events and scientific trends simply overtook Hegelianism. Some disagreements point to significant differences in philosophical orientation, with increasingly explicit political consequences. Historian John Toews points out that the rifts between various strands of Hegelian interpretation did not emerge suddenly after Hegel's death, but was already simmering under the exhilarating "mass conversion" to Hegelianism in the 1820s, which had seemed to promise its disciples a "resolution of all the major conflicts of human existence, a reconciling recognition of the

[22] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 21, emphasis in original.
[23] Horst Althaus, *Hegel: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), p. 158.
[24] This rapid process is vividly portrayed in Pinkard, *Hegel*, pp. 661-663. Indeed, it may be that this disintegration had started while Hegel was alive; biographer Horst Althaus even suggests that Hegel's death was precipitated by a political conflict with his talented disciple, Eduard Gans. See Althaus, *Hegel*, p. 273.
[25] Pinkard, *Hegel*, p. 661.
[26] Althaus, *Hegel*, p. 274. Revisiting the debates of the 1830s and 1840s, Breckman points out that "Hegelianism never enjoyed unchallenged dominion in German intellectual life, not even in Prussia." Warren Breckmann, *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origin of Radical Social Theory: Dethroning the Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 17.

identity of reason and reality, self and community, man and God."[27] As became increasingly evident, not *all* social conflicts were easily resolved, and there emerged different interpretations of the "historical relationship between the universal structures of reason and the phenomenal reality in which reason articulated its self-determinations."[28] Toward the end of the 1820s, three distinct trends could be discerned, which responded differently to this historical conundrum: The Hegelian movement increasingly divided into a right, a left, and a center.[29]

The first tendency, which came to be known as the Hegelian right, was "accommodationist."[30] In political terms, it asserted with confidence that the administrative, judicial, and political system of the Prussian state already represented the constitutional embodiment of reason in the world, as "the actuality of the absolute spirit as fully present."[31] Reality, to them, was already rational, and it was the philosophers' responsibility to grasp this rationality of the real. Influential public figures like Johannes Schulze, Leopold von Henning, and Phillip Marheineke represented the right-wing Hegelians.

The second tendency adopted a "critical-reformist" stance to reality: they recognized the progressive actualization of reason in the legacies of the French Revolution, Napoleonic codification, and Prussian reforms, but acknowledged that such an "essential" reality conflicted with the "appearances" of real political experience. Reality, for this Hegelian center, was not a completed process, but a dynamic one, which direly needed "philosophical comprehension provided the general principles for reformist activity," in order to "making appearances conform to the 'essential' reality of actualized reason."[32] This group included several of Hegel's closest associates and students, among them Eduard Gans, Carl Ludwig Michelet, and Karl Rosenkranz. For these thinkers, Hegel was essentially a theorist of the modern, liberal, and constitutional state.[33]

The third tendency, the nascent left, adopted a critical utopian or even revolutionary stance: they transformed Hegel's conceptual structures "from a history comprehended into a program for future action; the actuality of the absolute in self-conscious freedom became not a presupposition of knowledge but the object of constructive historical practice."[34] At first, this leftist tendency existed only on the very fringes of Hegelian movement, represented by figures like Friedrich W. Carové, Ludwig Feuerbach, David F. Strauss, and Bruno Bauer, but their influence would increase and become increasingly radical, as seen in the political trajectories of Arnold Ruge, Moses

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[27] John Edward Toews, "Transformations of Hegelianism, 1805-1846," in Frederick Beiser (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 387.
[28] Toews, "Transformations of Hegelianism," p. 387.
[29] In the 1830s, David F. Strauss would be the first to use this specific classification, clearly borrowed from French political terminology. And only later would Moses Hess explicitly link left Hegelianism to political radicalism and the communist movement. Allen W. Wood, "Hegel and Marxism," in Beiser (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, p. 414. Still, a strict classification along such ideological lines have been considered as problematic as the generational dividing lines between "Old" and "Young Hegelians." See Toews, *Hegelianism*, pp. 71-97, 205, 220, 217-242.
[30] Toews, *Hegelianism*, pp. 95-98.
[31] Toews, "Transformations of Hegelianism," p. 388.
[32] Toews, "Transformations of Hegelianism," pp. 388-89.
[33] Toews devotes significant sections of his *Hegelianism* to this political "center." See Toews, *Hegelianism*, particularly pp. 71-155, 203-242. Toews claims this center was left-leaning and republican, and until his death in 1839, Gans, for one, drifted markedly to the Left, inspired by the utopianism of Saint-Simon.
[34] Toews, "Transformations of Hegelianism," p. 390.

Hess, and Karl Marx. The left Hegelians or the Young Hegelians, as they are often called, challenged the rationality of the existing state of affairs, and they used the Hegelian logic to question the historical necessity of the Prussian state, the monarchy and the estates, and the emerging capitalist system.[35]

The conflicts first seemed containable within a broad Hegelian movement. During the 1830s, however, the philosophical battle lines were first drawn over fierce theological disputes about interpreting Christianity and God, but these tendencies soon crystallized into the distinct right, left, and center. In this period, the Prussian authorities also took a series of drastic measures to create the militarist state Prussia is renowned for, and these reforms intensified the conflicts over "reality" and its "rationality." Marx captured this historical irony when he wrote that Prussia is the only country to suffer a restoration without having endured its own proper revolution; it "never found itself in the company of freedom except once—*on the day of its burial*."[36]

In 1841, Schelling was summoned to assume Hegel's old chair, with a mission to "stamp out the dragon seed of Hegelian pantheism in Berlin." By the mid-1840s, Hegelianism had ended as a distinct historical movement, and was soon to be overtaken by the more radical approaches that grew in Hegel's fertile philosophical soil. Karl Marx certainly built his theories upon a Hegelian framework.[37] So too did the Russian anarchist, Mikhail Bakunin, whose statement that "the urge to destroy is a creative urge" is attributed to his education in dialectics.[38]

While the conflicts between the right and the left became by far the most significant during the late 1830s and early 1840s, and the Hegelian movement had all but disappeared, there remained a steadfast tendency that was committed to progressive reforms. These reformists continued to see Hegel as a guide for their aspirations. But their task became increasingly difficult. In 1857, Rudolf Haym published his influential Hegel study, *Hegel und seine Zeit*, which presented the philosopher as a parochial apologist for Prussian absolutism. Haym's image of Hegel would fundamentally shape the popular perception of Hegel, and the liberal reformers who had defended Hegel's progressive ideas—now seemingly against Hegel himself—gradually came to accept Haym's presentation, and their numbers dwindled to nothing.[39]

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[35] Breckmann, *Origins of Radical Social Theory*, and Toews, "Transformations of Hegelianism," pp. 389-90.

[36] Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works: Volume 3, 1843-1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), p. 177, emphasis in original.

[37] Tom Rockmore even argues that Marx never truly severed his ties to German Idealism, although this is a claim that is, to put it mildly, controversial. See Tom Rockmore, *In Kant's Wake: Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 53, 55. Rockmore argues that Marx and Engels substantially differed in their philosophical approach. What *is* generally acknowledged today, however, is that the relationship between Hegel and Marx is far more nuanced than the classical account suggests, where Marx broke fundamentally with German idealism when he "turned Hegel on his head." Robert Fine, *Political Investigations: Hegel, Marx, Arendt* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 79-89. Even Marxists today speak of "the myth of Hegel as the idealist who has everything upside down." See, for instance, David MacGregor, *The Communist Ideal in Hegel and Marx* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1984), p. 3.

[38] Brian Morris, *Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom* (Montréal: Black Rose, 1996).

[39] For a recent and somewhat more nuanced version of Haym's criticism, see Ernst Tugendhat, *Self-Consciousness and Self-Determination* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 317-23. Still, in contemporary scholarship the consensus has tipped markedly in favor of evaluating Hegel within the mainstream of European politics. See Allen W. Wood, "Editor's Introduction," in Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, xxxi.

These disagreements went deeper than theological disputes: they were political and essentially related to the philosophical interpretation of reality and how reason expressed itself phenomenally. The conflict between various strands of Hegelian philosophy revolved around how to interpret Hegel's perspective on actuality and its rationality.[40] It is precisely this interpretative fault line—between a Hegel who ratifies the given order and a Hegel who supplies the standard by which the given order is judged and found wanting—that the *Doppelsatz* forces us to confront directly. Therefore, before we venture into the legacy of Hegel's political philosophy, let us now have a closer look at his *Doppelsatz*.

**The Real and the Actual**

The *Doppelsatz states*: "What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational."[41] This arguably encapsulates Hegel's basic conception of reason and reality, and how rationality and actuality are interrelated. It is easy, and quite common, to point out the problems in translations from German, where the main terms, *Vernünftig* and *Wirklichkeit*, are not properly carried into English as "reason" and "reality."[42] In German, Hegel distinguishes *Wirklichkeit* from *Realität* as well as from *Existenz* and *Dasein*, and these are nuances that are difficult to convey into English. But the early conflicts, we should remember, were played out in Prussia and other German territories, of which language of course would not present the same problem, as they did when various translations reached English readers.

At any rate, I believe the key to understanding what Hegel meant by these concepts is found within Hegel's corpus. Hegel's political analyses are arguably informed by his broader *Logic*, and his accessible *Encyclopedia Logic* is highly instructive in evaluating what Hegel himself meant by "rationality" and "actuality."[43] Rationality, for Hegel, is not simply "intelligibility," it carries both an epistemic and a normative aspect. And actuality is not simply reality but is defined as the "unity of essence (*Wesen*) and existence (*Existenz*)."[44] Phenomena, for Hegel, are actual (*Wirklich*) to the extent to which they manifest and correspond to their inner essence: the mere fact that something exists does not constitute a sufficient criterion. Hegel is not saying that everything that exists is rational merely by the fact that it exists. Quite to the contrary, "within his technical vocabulary, things are *by definition* real to the extent that they fulfill their essence. The essence of a thing is *defined* as its underlying rational structure."[45] Furthermore: "To the extent that things fail to live up

[40] There are plenty of other controversial statements in the *Philosophy of Right*, not the least his assertion that "the state consists in the march of God in the world." Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §258a. A discussion of Hegel's peculiar Christian beliefs, or of what he meant by the state in this context, falls outside of the scope of this essay. For a good discussion, see Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, pp. 176-94.

[41] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 20.

[42] The original German version reads: "*Was vernünftig ist, wirklich ist; und was wirklich ist, vernünftig ist*," which is easily translated into the Scandinavian languages. Still, the problem of defining *Wirklichkeit* against other concepts of reality persists.

[43] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, translated by T.F Geraets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), particularly his doctrine of essence, §112-159. The distinction Hegel makes between *Existenz* and *Wirklichkeit* here is also a central feature of his monumental *Science of Logic*.

[44] Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §142.

[45] Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy*, p. 55, emphasis in original. Still, the real impetus to comprehending a phenomenon, Hegel would say, comes not from definitions but from Hegel's more dynamic notion of the concept (*Begrieff*).

to their essence," Michael Hardimon explains, "they fall under the categories of "mere appearance" (*Bloße Erscheinung*) and "illusion" (*Schein*)."[46] Actuality, for Hegel, is the fundamental *unity* of a phenomenon's "inside" with its "outside": there must be a unity between the inner rational structure of a phenomenon and the external embodiment of that rational structure. In the political case, this essence is the rational content of *Sittlichkeit* already sketched above—mutual recognition, actualized freedom, the "realm" in which a person can be at home. A social order or specific political institutions correspond to their essence, and so achieve actuality, exactly to the degree that they embody these relations of recognition; a modern state that fails to express them is not, in Hegel's sense, an actual state at all.

This essence, however, is not distilled from the creative use of our speculative faculties—what Hegel would dismiss as "ideals of the imagination"—the rationality of a phenomenon would have to be grounded in reality. Still, his conceptualization of how the rational and the actual interact has profoundly *developmental* characteristics. Hardimon identifies two slightly different notions of this interaction in Hegel's earlier Heidelberg lectures, where he had defined the interaction between reason and reality as: "What is rational must happen, since on the whole its constitution is only its development," and "What is rational becomes actual, and what is actual becomes rational."[47] These versions are strikingly developmental and suggest that the future—and not the present—is the true locus of rationality. As Hegel understands reality as essentially a process of becoming, these versions seem to more adequately convey the critical ethical impulse in Hegel's political philosophy.

It may be argued, however, that Hegel also understands present reality as a *result* of historical processes, and that reason in many ways has *become* realized in human history so that the rational *is* the actual and the actual is the rational. According to Paul Franco, it is "probably a mistake to view Hegel's political philosophy as being fundamentally animated by a utopian impulse. Hegel's location of human freedom or autonomy in the political sphere and his ethical conception of the state seem to be motivated more by a concern to chasten and discipline the subjectivism unleashed by the Kantian-Fichtean conception of morality than by a desire to raise the stakes of politics."[48] Hegel's problem of political justification touches a deeper subjective chord as well. The "problem of consciousness" is, as Hegel says, to actualize social ideality by rationally justify the social determinations of one's life, to internalize these social determinations, and thus transform external necessity into internal necessity: "The ethical person is conscious of the content of his action as something necessary, something that is valid in and for itself."[49] To a large extent, freedom, for Hegel, consists in the recognition of necessity. "To be sure, necessity as such is not yet freedom; but freedom presupposes necessity and contains it sublated within itself."[50] There is a striking parallel between the emergence of self-consciousness and the social recognition of a rational essence that dwells within reality; how society comes to itself, so to speak, through its political constitution. Still, freedom for Hegel is not

[46] Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy*, p. 53.
[47] Hegel quoted in Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy*, p. 63.
[48] Paul Franco, *Hegel's Philosophy of Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 31.
[49] "This consciousness," Hegel continues, "is so far from diminishing his freedom, that, on the contrary, it is only through this consciousness that his abstract freedom becomes a freedom that is actual and rich in content, as distinct from freedom of choice [*Willkür*], a freedom that still lacks content and is merely possible." Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §158a.
[50] Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §158a.

strictly a necessitarian, determinist concept of reconciling the individual with his social destiny. Shlomo Avineri emphasizes how the specific connotation of the word *Wirklich* derives from "its root in the verb "to act" (*Wirken*), which makes it clear that "actuality" (*Wirklichkeit*) is not a merely passive, natural given."[51] On the contrary, "what is "actual" is always a consequence of a deed, of action; hence a strong activist undertone runs through this couplet." Despite his objections to subjectivism, Hegel appreciated this "activist" impulse.[52]

This progressive construal of the *Doppelsatz* is not a recent gloss. In *Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse argued against readings that made Hegel a philosopher of resignation, insisting that *Wirklichkeit* designates a process, not any fixed state. Actuality is what has come to correspond to its own potentiality, so that whatever falls short of its concept—however stubbornly it may persist empirically—has not yet, or not fully, become actual in Hegel's technical sense. On this reading the *Doppelsatz* cannot license a simple affirmation of the given order, since the given order is precisely what stands to be measured against its own unrealized concept.[53] Marcuse pressed the point further: it was Hegel's dialectic, not positivism's affirmation of bare fact, that supplied the resources for a genuinely critical theory of society, since positivism forecloses in advance the very distinction—between mere existence and rational actuality—on which critique depends.

Hegel, however, was no political revolutionary; he explicitly warned against making ethical "oughts" out of air.[54] Indeed, he developed much of his ethics and political philosophy to counter what he regarded as irresponsible utopianism and abstract morality. Hegel's criticism of Fichte's *Sollen* (which perhaps best translates as "ought" or "a striving," not simply "should") is devastating, and he rejects any kind of unmediated normative postulates.

**Conservative, Progressive, and Neutral Readings**

As we have seen, there have been two readings of Hegel's dictum about the real and the actual: one is conservative or quietist (what exists is good), and the other is critical and progressive (only what is fully actualized is good). Robert Stern suggests that there is a third option for how to understand the *Doppelsatz*: a "neutral" one.[55] In going through how Hegel generally prefaces his works, Stern argues that the *Doppelsatz* is an argument in defense of methodological rationalism, not normative evaluations.[56]

Actuality, Stern argues, can be seen as a technical concept, distinguished from both existence (*Existenz*) and being (*Dasein*). For something to be actual, it cannot merely exist; it must correspond to its essential nature. Stern goes a long way in accepting that such a progressive interpretation is in line with Hegel's general system, reflected in the *Encyclopedia Logic*.[57] Of course, this is the very distinction that opens for a "critical gap"

[51] Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, p. 126.
[52] In this respect, it is interesting to note that Hegel suggests a close affinity with the Aristotelian concept of *energeia*. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §158a.
[53] Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (1941; Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1960), pp. 150-153.
[54] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §13. Hegel's discussion of "Absolute freedom and terror" in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* is also illuminating.
[55] Stern, Robert (2006). "Hegel's *Doppelsatz*: A Neutral Reading". *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 44, pp. 235-266.
[56] Stern, "Hegel's *Doppelsatz*", pp. 235-236, 247.
[57] Stern, "Hegel's *Doppelsatz*", pp. 237-238.

between a phenomenon's existence and its essence, yet Stern argues that we should take a more cautious approach to this statement, precisely because it opens itself to subjective interpretations of just what this *ought* is.

Still, Stern also offers another understanding of the actual, which is what he claims Hegel intended in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*. He argues that actuality should be understood as a quality that is subject to rational inquiry. Stern's neutral reading suggests that Hegel's purpose in distinguishing between the actual and the existing is primarily methodological and epistemological, not normative. Philosophy is the quest for fundamental truths, insights into phenomena that deserve rational inquiry. For Hegel, Stern argues, the *Doppelsatz* implies that the actual is open to systematic investigation through rational science, in contrast to the merely existing, which can be arbitrary or insignificant. This, he argues, is not because the actual is "good," but because it is fundamental and necessary, and thus open to rational inquiry.[58]

By interpreting actuality as a category of necessity and systematic intelligibility, as that which is open to rational, scientific inquiry, Stern avoids assigning the *Doppelsatz* to a normative political agenda. The *Doppelsatz* is therefore not a claim that "the actual is right or good," but one that philosophy, through its rationalist method, can engage with the real (the actual), rather than lapse into empty utopianism or subjective arbitrariness. Stern does admit that there is nothing in his readings of Hegel that "suggests that philosophy cannot propose any institutional reforms at all—it just must do so based on a proper method, otherwise it will have the problematic status of merely subjective opinion."[59] While I agree with this, I also think that dialectics should be considered more of an approach, a sensibility, and an outlook, rather than a simple method: within a dialectical ontology, there is room for a broad set of developmental approaches that stimulate social development, creativity, and sensitivity.

My main objection to Stern's reading is that it is philosophically diminishing. Instead of classifying these readings as merely conservative, progressive, and neutral, they can also be classified as stifling, stimulating and trivial, respectively. The conservative reading is all too focused on justifying what is and therefore stifles philosophical exploration. The progressive reading, on the other hand, opens for philosophical reflections on the potentialities and rational developments, a quality I find analytically productive, and is witnessed historically in movements for civil right, political reform, and social progress. For these purposes, the neutral reading appears trivial. Stern may be right that this "neutral" reading was what Hegel intended, but Hegel's overarching philosophical system certainly also harbors the potential of understanding the actuality in a normative sense, as a commitment to explore and actualize what is rational. It is precisely this impulse, this search for what is rational in social development, that makes Hegel's political philosophy relevant today.

Even if we agree with Stern's rationalist interpretation, there is *also* an undeniable "ought" to be found within Hegel's philosophy, that guides the Hegelian ethos. The fact that these "oughts" can and should not be reduced to subjective proclivities, does not diminish their significance. The world is rational both in the sense of being intelligible and being driven by inner dynamics. As I see it, this ethos pulsates in Hegel's speculative metaphysics and its dynamic focus on totality, actuality, and transcendence, and it seems difficult to interpret his political philosophy as a finite, "closed system." Indeed, the nature

[58] Stern, "Hegel's *Doppelsatz*", pp. 238-242, 251.
[59] Stern, "Hegel's *Doppelsatz*", p. 246.

of speculative philosophy is concerned with precisely understanding how things are *and* are not, and the notion that the rational is the actual is a speculative proposition.[60] To be sure, Hegel also suggests that the period in which he lived was actualizing the *Geist* in world history; his philosophical approach was teleologically determinist and his world, he thought, was ripe to be classified into categories that would adequately encompass a dynamical reality. Still, as we have seen, he acknowledges philosophers could only come to insight in retrospect, after the fact; but I find it likely that he could accept a more open-ended unfolding of history than much of his works suggest. Again, how we interpret this "ought" is crucial: either we emphasize its location in "reality" as the existing expressions of the *Geist* in the world, or we locate it in the "actual" standards of rationality. But contrary to what Robert Stern has suggested, I do not think there is really a "neutral" approach to this dilemma, although his "trivial" reading may well be a part of the total picture.

But the historical expressions and interpretations are also part of the picture. As history has shown us, the difference in emphasis—or in translations and interpretations—carries weighty political conclusions. How we interpret reality and actuality directly informs our political analyses today, as they did historically.

**The Algebra of Revolution?**

Hegel's strong emphasis on the state as the actualization of freedom in history arguably seems politically suffocating, particularly if it is elevated to a principle. With minor adjustments, specific elements of his theory could indeed justify Karl Popper's rejection of Hegelianism as a dangerous approval of authoritarianism.[61] Still, when we consider the epoch in which Hegel lived; his emphasis is not at all that strange. For all the faults of monarchical centralization and its destruction of local freedoms (as they would appear in Hegel's own time), it is a fact that throughout the Medieval period and early modern times, the "king's peace" brought law to the land, undermined feudal arrangements, and created the historical preconditions for civic equality. Contrasted with the constitutional advances of the Great French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, his native Württemberg or Prussia must have appeared woefully outmoded as well as transitory, and he sought to encourage the political traits he deemed progressive by locating constitutionalism, centralization, and civic freedoms firmly within the German context. As we know the trajectory of European totalitarianism during the last century, it seems easy to reject his praise of the Prussian state. Fundamentally, Hegel is concerned with how the state transcends "natural law" into genuine social cohesion; yet Avineri is also correct in observing that Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* is not a philosophy of the *state* as such, but of *right*.[62]

Modern scholars have emphasized how recognition and intersubjectivity are components of Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* and downplay his verbatim appraisals of the unification of political will in monarchical authority. Indeed, new interest in Hegel's political philosophy stems rather from a broader reading of the *Philosophy of Right* as "a phenomenology of freedom."[63] This suggests that we can avoid the Hegelian ossification of political structures, which seems to me to contradict the critical and dynamic thrust of

[60] Jackson, M. W. "Hegel: The Real and the Actual," in Stewart, John (ed.). *The Hegel Myths and Legends* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), p. 22.
[61] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
[62] Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, pp. 82-86.
[63] Robert R. Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 27.

Hegel's philosophical project. Despite important differences, today's increased interest in Hegel's practical ethics stems from an appreciation that his political project is more open-ended than Hegel would allow for in the *Philosophy of Right*. While thinkers like Shlomo Avineri, Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre have emphasized Hegel's "communitarian" focus, others, like Allen W. Wood, Terry Pinkard, and Paul Franco reject this interpretation and emphasize instead Hegel's "liberalism." There is a distinct paradox here: by rejecting Hegel's more speculative philosophy— his philosophical system—these scholars suggest we can retain Hegel's insights as critical correctives, yet, as we have seen, it was precisely Hegel's dialectical metaphysics that made him capable of passing moral judgments over the rationality of reality. Regardless of whether Hegel himself failed to appreciate these ethical criteria of evaluating political realities himself, or if he chose to conceal them from Prussian authorities, the force of Hegel's political theory lies not in its concrete practical suggestions, but in the critical faculties it offers in evaluating the rationality of society and its "forms of freedom."

In the 1920s, just as Marxism developed into a stale doctrine that provided justification for established states like Soviet Russia under Stalin, it is worth noting how Marxists like Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch called for a return to Hegelian dialectics so as to preserve the critical tension in Marxist philosophy and politics. This attests to the critical force of Hegel's *negativity*.[64] By the same token, Marcuse, whose reading of the *Doppelsatz* I outlined above, did much to rescue Hegelian dialectics from the charges Karl Popper leveled against it. Indeed, positivism, Marcuse argued, was far more prone to fascism and totalitarianism than Hegelian thought ever was.[65] Additionally, it is interesting to note how a prominent heir to critical theory, Axel Honneth, appropriates Hegel's political theory in more general terms, and uses it to explain contemporary society and explore the social basis for political freedom.[66] In recent decades, Hegelian dialectics have also been explored as a possible foundation for radical ecological philosophy and participatory democracy.[67]

For all these reasons, and despite Hegel's own objections, it seems to me that his philosophical approach offers a dynamic theoretical framework on which to ground a social ethics and politics that is both utopian and reconstructive. This was also how many of his contemporaries saw him. Nobody expresses the enthusiastic reception of Hegel's philosophy within radical circles better that the Russian revolutionary exile Alexander Herzen: "Hegel's dialectic is a fearful battering-ram in spite of its double-facedness and its badge of Prussian Protestantism; it vaporized everything that existed and dissipated everything that was a check on reason."[68] These radicals understood the ambiguity of Hegel's practical politics, but held that his philosophy "emancipates man in an unusual way and leaves not one stone upon another of the Christian world, of the world of tradition

[64] Central to Hegel is the "negation of the negation," the *Aufhebung*. "Negative," here, does not necessarily mean "pessimistic," as it seemed to be in Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 2007).
[65] Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, pp. 323-88.
[66] Honneth, *Pathologies*, pp. 48-80.
[67] See, for example, Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (San Francisco: AK Press, 2005); *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism*, 2nd rev. ed. (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1995).
[68] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, pp. 641-642n11.

that has outlived itself."[69] Indeed, Herzen concludes: "Hegel's dialectics is the algebra of revolution."[70]

To conclude, there are at least three ways we can understand Hegel's *Doppelsatz*. The first is a reactionary or conservative view, which will read it as an apology for the status quo: what *is*, is rational. Few hold this position today. Even in his own time, Hegel's political philosophy could not be read as simply a rubber stamp for the Prussian state. Second, we could understand it in a "neutral" sense, as simply an appeal to reason, but that perspective is trivial and seems to counter the thrust of his dialectical metaphysics: it leaves us with a sterile version of the dynamic approach. A third reading is distinctly progressive, or even revolutionary. This is the approach I think makes more sense, both in evaluating Hegel's overarching approach, and in making his philosophy relevant for our time. It may not be an "algebra of revolution," but it is a perspective that constantly challenges the what is. From a dialectical viewpoint, everything should be judged by reason and evaluated according to its inner logic. The *process* of justification is central, not the specific forms that are justified: every constitution, political institution, and social arrangement should be subject to rational scrutiny, through critical tools that are available to us all. What is, should *always* be evaluated by what ought to be. Dialectical philosophy provides an ethical impulse that could generate a plethora of social and political alternatives that could advance society and its rational forms.

In this essay, I have briefly explored Hegel's political philosophy, as it was developed in his *Philosophy of Right*, and as it was interpreted by his followers in the decades after his death. I have also discussed the difficulties his contemporaries had in interpreting the *Doppelsatz* and how Hegel philosophically distinguished between reality and actuality. I then explored how his politics fit in with his broader philosophical outlook. The impulse traced here—from the will's movement out of bare possibility into self-conscious actuality, through *Sittlichkeit* as actualized freedom, to the unstable identification of the rational with the actual—is not incidental to Hegel's political philosophy; it is its recurring logical form. "Reality," as Hegel sees it, is unfolding, and may be more or less "real," depending on the extent to which it actualizes its inherent rational potentialities. This is a powerful normative guideline, and a creative point of departure for any social philosophy that seeks to transcend individual rationality and morality. While I don't think Hegel's political philosophy is useful as a blueprint for social organization, it is intellectually stimulating as an ethical corrective. Although Hegel's practical, concrete suggestions for political organization were cautiously reformist in his day—and woefully conservative and outdated in ours—I argue that his philosophy still contains a strong ethical, even utopian, thrust. The *Doppelsatz* signifies not resignation to what exists, but a call to engage critically with reality, and serves as a reminder that philosophy's task is not to mirror the world as it is, but to reveal how it might become more fully rational and free. This dialectical impulse offers critical insights for both political agency and social freedom.

Eirik Hasvik, University of South-Eastern Norway, eirik.hasvik@usn.no

[69] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, p. 237. Herzen was painfully aware of life under political repression and censorship and suggested that Hegel's political theory "perhaps with intention, [was] badly formulated."

[70] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, p. 237.

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