

The Time of Philosophy: On Hegel's Conception of Modern Philosophy

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In the Preface to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel included a couple of iconic formulations, which have agitated his readers ever since. As regards the relationship between philosophy and its time, he famously referred to the now proverbial figure of Minerva's owl:

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; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk. (GW 14, p. 16; EPR, p. 23)¹

But nothing compares to the notorious *Doppelsatz*:

*What is rational is actual;
and what is actual is rational.* (GW 14, p. 14; EPR, p. 20)

The two quotations are often read as Hegel's vindication of philosophical quietism and conformism. Since every philosophy is "its time comprehended in thought," and since it appears "only

¹ In general, Hegel's works are cited here according to the reference editions *Gesammelte Werke* (Hegel 1968f.) and *Vorlesungen* (Hegel 1983f.), whereas the letters are cited according to the Hoffmeister edition (Hegel 1952f.). The available English translations are used and cited after the semicolon.

at a time when actuality has [...] attained its completed state,” philosophy simply cannot turn its gaze to the future, let alone assume any significant role in transforming the world. Quite the contrary, by comprehending what is, philosophy is bound to acknowledge the rationality of the actual, to bring about reconciliation with it, and as such, to conform to the existing order.

There are, of course, many other, arguably “less important” places where Hegel seems to affirm the exact opposite. In an 1808 letter to Niethammer, for instance, he writes:

I am daily ever more convinced that theoretical work accomplishes more in the world than practical work. Once the realm of representation is revolutionized, actuality will not hold out. (Br I, p. 253; L, p. 179)

What is more, in the opening lecture on natural and state law, delivered in Berlin on October 22, 1818, Hegel described the situation in Germany at the time as a “middle state” between the reign of the rational idea of freedom and the rest of positive rights. In the ensuing “struggle that [aimed] to equalize the concept of freedom with actuality,” he—programmatically—accorded a special place to philosophy:

Once the spirit of the people has risen to a higher stage, the constitutional elements relating to the previous stages have no footing anymore; they must collapse, and no power is able to hold them. Philosophy thus recognizes that only the rational can happen, whatever external particular phenomena may seem to oppose it. (GW 26, p. 234)

The obvious discrepancy between these formulations and the view expressed in the *Philosophy of Right* has given rise to a number of readings that tried to explain it away by means of an alleged (Ilting) or feigned (d’Hondt) accommodation, which was supposedly prompted by a very concrete fear of political

repression in the wake of Cotzebue's murder. I, on the contrary, would rather maintain that Hegel's basic position remained remarkably stable throughout the period in question. If there was a change, it related to his diminished enthusiasm for direct political engagement, not to his refusal of the inherently political nature of philosophy. But this is not the place to dwell on that.² Instead, I will take the first two formulations as they stand and try to understand their significance. I will start by looking into the *Doppelsatz* in order to elucidate its consequences for the role of philosophy in its time, and then proceed to the alleged belatedness of philosophy. I will try to show that, for Hegel, *true* philosophy, far from being quietist or conformist in any common sense of the word, is inherently political and timely.

In a paper devoted to the *Doppelsatz*, Jean-François Kervégan has shown—exemplarily—that in order to understand it properly, one has to consider the categorical structure of the actual; especially, one has to take into account the fact that, in Hegel, the actual does not belong to the logic of being but to the logic of essence.³ To put it in an extremely simplified way, the actual is simply not something flat and given, as is the case with *Dasein*, it rather includes a certain depth and as such stands for the inherent mediating principle that governs the sequence of temporal events. The actual is that which in the present state, always determined and limited, already points beyond it. By equating the rational and the actual, Hegel therefore not only affirms

² In my view, to put it very briefly, the change in question pertained mainly to Hegel's conception of philosophical practice, which was now more narrowly restricted to philosophical inquiry in the strict sense; and this, in turn, was conditioned by his failed involvement with the *Burschenschaften* as well as with his personal and theoretical confrontation with Fries.

³ Incidentally, this was also emphasized by Hegel: "But when I spoke of actuality, it should have been evident in what sense I am using this expression, since I treated actuality in my more extensive *Logic*, too" (GW 20, § 6, p. 45; Enc I, p. 34).

that, contrary to first impression, the social universe is a fully legitimate object of rational knowledge; he also assigns a specific role to philosophy in the self-sublation of its present state. “As a thinking of the rationality within actuality,” observes Kervégan, “philosophy fixes a limitation to each form or degree of the real world.” Hence, “political philosophy is a *political epistemology*” (Kervégan 2016, p. 41). Without having to comment on current issues or overtly engage in political campaigns, philosophy—at least true philosophy—is political in its very form.

This inherently political nature of philosophy is closely related to Hegel’s conception of knowledge. In contrast to the traditional separation of the subjective and the objective, of knowing and doing, Hegel’s speculative knowledge is essentially *subjectivized*. In Hegel, so-called theory is never merely “theoretical.” In a similar vein, the rational is not only something that pertains to the realm of the subject’s thoughts, but as an “*objective thought*” informs the structure of the world as well. This is worth keeping in mind when we speak about the reconciliation that philosophy is supposed to grant to those who know. When Hegel observes that what prevents us from finding satisfaction in the world is “the fetter of some abstraction or other, which has not been liberated into the concept” (GW 14, p. 15; EPR, p. 22), we tend to understand this in the sense that it is *our* knowledge that has remained defective. This may be the case, of course. It is important to note, however, that the above passage could equally be read the other way round, in the sense that it is the *objective* realm that has *not yet* been liberated into the form of the concept. It is Hegel’s contention that the world, social and natural, is full of contradictions and populated by abstractions. If, therefore, there is a discrepancy between “the self-conscious reason” and “the reason that is,” this lack of agreement can also be ascribed to the present state of the “real world” itself—with the implications being substantially different this time.

Be that as it may, Hegel consistently criticizes *normative thinking*, which steps forth with would-be ideals and measures the present situation against them. Such ideal conceptions lack any grip on the present world that would be needed to transform it effectively. Indeed, they are not only futile, they are dangerous, because in their striving for self-realization, they are bound to clash against the world with inevitably destructive consequences—as was aptly demonstrated in the French Revolution, or in the case of Fries’s ethics of conviction. Nonetheless, Hegel does not confine philosophy to the modest role of merely observing the world, quite the contrary. The point is only that the principles of transformation must not be taken from some abstract normative realm, but have to be recognized in the very objects they apply to. If philosophy has to teach us “how the state should be recognized,” this means, Kervégan argues, that it has “to render evident the presence of both what ‘actually’ structures the real and attests its internal limit” (Kervégan 2016, p. 13). In Hegel, the concept of an object, the famous concrete universal, not only implies a normative dimension that no finite particular can ever express adequately, it also includes the movement of its actualization.⁴

There is one point, though, that complicates Kervégan’s reading. If philosophy is inherently political, and as such always

⁴ In another recent interpretation, R. Stern proposed a “neutral” methodological reading of the passage, claiming—against Kervégan, for instance—that Hegel’s position was fundamentally apolitical: “The *Doppelsatz* can therefore be seen as an expression of Hegel’s faith in a rationalistic conception of philosophy, rather than a claim about the normative status of ‘the actual,’ *however* ‘the actual’ is understood. On this account, then, both the conservative *and* the progressive readings are mistaken; in linking the ‘rational’ with the ‘actual’ in this way, Hegel was not meaning to say anything about whether the ‘actual’ is ‘right’ or ‘good’” (Stern 2006, p. 251). Therein, however, Stern is wrong: in Hegel, the rational or the actual are *bound to be good*, since the rational idea includes the notion of good, together with striving for its realization.

already partakes in transforming the world, how, then, are we to reconcile this position with Hegel's other claim that "philosophy [...] always comes too late to perform this function" (GW 14, p. 16; EPR, p. 23)? To address this problem, Kervégan proposed the example of Plato's *Republic*, put forward by Hegel himself.⁵ However, by using Plato to illustrate philosophy's role, Kervégan, it seems, only made the issue worse. It is true that, according to Hegel, Plato managed to express "the nature of Greek ethics" in his *Republic*, and that he somehow also captured the "deeper principle" of "free infinite personality," which constituted the very pivot "on which the impending world revolution turned" (GW 14, p. 14; EPR, p. 20). To that extent, Plato's philosophy *was* a child of its time. But we are obliged to note that, in Hegel's view, Plato's project was essentially *conservative* (he wanted to *preserve* Greek ethical life against this new principle), *bound to fail* (because nothing can stop the progress of the world-spirit), and *unaware* of its true intentions (obviously). If, indeed, Plato was to be the model, then philosophy can be said to participate in transforming the world only on condition of *not knowing what it is doing*, of *not knowing what it knows*—and this is probably not the role that Hegel would have liked to ascribe to philosophy in the modern world, at least not to true philosophy.

How, then, are we supposed to reconcile the alleged transformative role of philosophy with Hegel's claim about its structural tootlateness, according to which philosophy, "as the thought of the world," is said to appear "only at a time when actuality has gone through its formative process and attained its completed state"?

For Hegel, this is first and foremost a historical fact, a *manifest lesson of history*. The great names of philosophy always, as it were, appeared only after a major breakdown of the respective objective spirit had already occurred—be it in Greece,

⁵ For a closer assessment of Hegel's use of Plato's *Republic*, see Ware 2000.

Rome, or medieval Europe.⁶ It is significant, however, that when Hegel tries to provide a more detailed explanation of this fact, he comes up not with one but at least *two* different accounts. According to one interpretation, presented in his lectures on the philosophy of right in the autumn of 1819, for instance, Hegel observes that Plato's *Republic* was indeed a "mirror of the true" (GW 26, p. 335). "Plato has recognized the actuality of his world, the principle in the form of simplicity; this is Greek spirit, Greek ethical life" (*ibid.*, p. 336). This ethical life, though, was itself "inadequate" since it contained the "highest principle" of subjective consciousness only in a "concealed" form. And it is in this negative way—as something to be repressed—that Plato incorporated it into his conception of the state. His *Republic* was accordingly a true comprehension of the Greek spirit both in its essence and its limitations, and what eventually led to the demise of this shape of ethical life also explains the mere ideality of Plato's philosophical project. "Had Plato's *Republic* not been something inadequate in itself, it would have necessarily come into actuality" (*ibid.*, p. 335). Its ideality was, as it were, a mark of adequate comprehension of an inadequate ethical life.

Nonetheless, the very form of thought—philosophical reflection as such—implied "a separation" that was alien to the simplicity of the Greek spirit. And in Hegel's view, this separation was not a product of philosophical reflection, but rather a sign that the original harmony had already been lost.

Philosophy comes forward as a spirit that separates itself; when it paints its grey in grey the separation into soul and body has already

⁶ "These are the times of the beginning demise, of people's corruption [...] As Socrates appeared, there was no participation in the public anymore; actuality satisfied him no longer, and he looked for this satisfaction in thought. Thus the Roman philosophy developed under emperors, at the time of empire's misfortune. Thus in the 15th, 16th century upon resurgence of philosophy, the spirit of the peoples was not satisfied in the same manner anymore" (HV 6, p. 296).

ensued; it is not philosophy that brings the break; it has already taken place. (ibid., p. 339)

Commenting on the meaning of this break, Hegel further suggested that philosophy also contains “a moment of reconciliation,” if only a partial one, since it “sublates the separation,” but does so solely in consciousness. This suggestion was later spelled out in Hegel’s lectures on the history of philosophy:

When philosophy comes forward to spread its abstractions, painting its grey in grey, the freshness of youth and liveliness is already over; indeed, it brings about reconciliation, but reconciliation not in the actuality as such, but only in the world of thought. (HV 6, p. 239)

In sum, according to this reading, the existence of philosophical endeavor is itself a mark of separation between the ideal and the real, which in turn indicates that the initial unity of ethical life has already been lost. As a consequence, reconciliation brought about by philosophy can only be ideal, one would say *ideological*, poised to *preserve* the world that is bound to disappear.

According to the interpretation that Hegel proposed in his lectures on the history of philosophy in 1825/26, however, philosophy is supposed to play an *active* role in bringing about a new spirit—and it is supposed to do this despite being too late. Here, Hegel likewise starts with the premise that “philosophy is completely identical with the spirit of its time” (HV 6, p. 237). It cannot but express the essence of the present spirit. However, by being the thinking of what is, “philosophy, on the other hand, in this form stands above its time,” and in this form, as knowledge, “it is out of its time.” This “formal difference,” comments Hegel, is at the same time a “real, actual difference”:

This knowledge is also that which precisely produces a new form in the development of spirit. The formations of spirit are merely modes of knowing; through knowing, spirit posits a difference

between knowledge and that which is; this again contains a new determination, and so a new philosophy appears. (Ibid., pp. 237–238)

The formal difference is real insofar as it opens up a space to overcome the limitations of the present configuration. Philosophy features as “the inner birthplace of spirit which later appears as actuality” (ibid., p. 238). For instance, Hegel continues, “what was in Greek philosophy has later come into actuality in the Christian world.” In any event, in what seems to be the world-spirit version of the method of immanent progression, which Hegel once deployed in the *Phenomenology*, the transition to the new shape is first made in the realm of thought.⁷ Philosophy, which in thinking its time always comes too late to preserve the old, is, according to this interpretation, at the same time the construction site where the first building blocks of the new are laid. Its delay in relation to the closing day coincides with its being ahead in relation to the coming one.

The discrepancy between the above readings is perplexing. It should make us pause in our confidence that we know what the belatedness of philosophy really refers to. What is more, this incongruence suggests that there must be something else involved, which we have somehow failed to consider. And this—such is the thesis I would like to propose—relates to the transformations that occurred both in the shape of ethical life and in the place of philosophy within the absolute spirit from the antiquity to modern times. I would also say that philosophy, too, must change its form in order to be able to perform its task

⁷ This is Ware’s position: “Because philosophical self-consciousness is the product of contradictions in an existing mode of life, it cannot erase those contradictions and rejuvenate a dying culture. But it can, and necessarily does, lead to the birth of a new form” (Ware 1999, p. 15). See also GW 26, p. 579: “When this universal spirit comprehends a particular mode, it makes this its object, and as it does this, it is raised above it. [...] The spirit progresses in this way.” For an overview of the intricate topic of Hegel’s metaphilosophy, see Miolli 2017.

in the modern world: from a philosophy of abstract thought it must develop into a philosophy of the free concept.

Hegel was convinced that he was living in a time of epochal changes, and he had some non-trivial reasons to believe that the modern world is decisively different from the pre-modern one. In his view, the Greek ethical life was defective, since it was not able to accommodate the principle of subjective freedom. It was beautiful, indeed, but it was also inherently fragile, and once a subject appeared in the midst of this seemingly harmonious substance, a subject that was stubborn enough in defending her deed, as was the case with Antigone, it was bound to fail. While the Roman world acknowledged this principle and elevated it into an abstract right, it was plagued by an inability to produce a common ethical substance. Hegel maintained that it was thus only in modern times that the problem of how to integrate the principle of subjective freedom with the universality of the ethical substance was finally solved, first by Luther's Reformation and then by the French Revolution. Hegel was well aware that there remained a lot to be done, that the existing states had oh-so many specific issues still to resolve, and that empirically they may even fail. However, he was confident that in the modern epoch the concept of freedom had found its principled realization.

In addition, we have to consider that, according to Hegel, the historical development of the shape of ethical life goes hand in hand with a parallel progression in the shapes of the absolute spirit, that is, in the privileged modes of consciousness the spirit has of itself. While the ethical community once attained its self-awareness primarily in art, and later in religion, the highest mode is now reserved for science. To put it in an extremely simplified way: If the Greek world was *beautiful*, and the medieval one was *pious*, the modern world is *rational*. The role traditionally performed first by art and then by religion, is now accordingly taken by science, Hegel seems to affirm, up to the

point that instead of priests we now have a “special *estate*” dedicated to the cultivation of “science and philosophy in particular” (GW 18, p. 27).⁸

This progression in the dominant forms of the absolute spirit further produced analogous modifications in the relation between philosophy and the state. To illustrate the change in question Hegel often referred to the case of Frederick II, who was nicknamed “the philosopher-king.” True, he earned this epithet on account of the metaphysical treatises (in the Wolffian style) that he wrote. However, Hegel remarks, “he was called philosophical king also in the sense that he set himself a completely universal purpose, the welfare, the best of the state, as the principle of his acts and all of his rulings” (HV 8, p. 11). And while subsequent princes abided by the same universal principles, they were not called philosophers anymore since by then, according to Hegel, *the time itself had become philosophical*.

If Plato demanded that philosophers should govern, that institutions be formed according to universal principles, in the modern states this is much more realized; essentially, universal principles are the bases of the modern states. [...] Consequently, one may say that what Plato demands is in substance established. (Ibid., pp. 11–12)

⁸ In Hegel’s modern state, the universal estate is composed of those who have made the universal the main object of their activity. As such, it includes not only state officials but also teachers and scientists: “To the universal estate belong also teachers who, for the universal best, devote themselves to the sciences” (GW 26, 118). It is interesting to note that the members of the universal estate do not send their delegates into parliament—not because they are supposed to be apolitical, but because their primary job is considered inherently political already. And let us not forget that for Hegel “the state possesses *knowledge*,” that “the state, too, has its doctrine,” and finally, that “science is to be found on the side of the state, for it has the same element of form as the state” (GW 14, § 270R, pp. 220–222; EPR pp. 299–300). It is therefore not unreasonable to claim that in Hegel’s modern state teachers and scientists, philosophers in particular, *are* state officials.

Again, Hegel did not want to deny that many existing states were still far from being fully rational and free; indeed, in his view, Prussia was in “the middle state.” The important thing, however, was that the fundamental structure was now different. Whereas once, some “30, 40 years before,” public authority used to be based on fear and force, “in the recent time it is the universal principles” that are acknowledged as the source of right. “The culture of the world has taken another turn,” Hegel declares, “the thought has put itself on top of everything that pretends to be valid” (GW 26, p. 773).⁹ And while rationality is a timeless requirement, this epochal shift in the social role of rational knowledge inevitably put philosophy, too, in front of a “more specific” task: “Since it is the culture of the time that has elevated to this form, it is a more specific need [of philosophy] to recognize and conceptualize the thought of right” (ibid., p. 774). Now, philosophy is strictly contemporary to its world.

According to Hegel, Plato was therefore right when he voiced “the highest pretension of philosophy,” insisting that “the governing and philosophizing should coincide” (ibid., p. 334). But at the time of its formulation, this call for reflection went *against* the form of the existing ethical life. In the pre-modern ethical world, philosophy not only came too late to apply the rejuvenating cure, but it actually facilitated its ultimate demise. The modern ethical life, on the contrary, includes not only the principle of subjectivity, so that it does not need to suppress inner differences, it also has rational knowledge as the privileged form of its awareness. Consequently, philosophy (and science in general) not only is not in any structural delay in relation to the world, but now also designates the very place of its concentrated

⁹ The “*power of spirit*” has established itself up to that point, Hegel professed in his inaugural lecture in Berlin, where “it is only *ideas*, and what complies with the *ideas*, that can now maintain itself: what is to be valid, must *justify* itself before *insight* and *thought*” (GW 18, p. 12).

actuality. For Hegel, philosophy now *is* the self-consciousness of the present spirit!¹⁰

If we now return to the grey in grey, we first have to make some qualifications regarding the proper scope of Hegel's declaration. In fact, on this particular occasion Hegel does not aim at philosophy as such, he explicitly refers to the attitude of those philosophers who would like to “*issue instructions* on how the world ought to be” (GW 14, p. 16; EPR, p. 23). It is against such *abstractly normativistic* philosophies—Fries's in particular, we may safely assume—that Hegel *additionally*, in the guise of illustration (“at any rate, always”) alludes to the manifest lesson of history.

What used to be the case before does not need to hold any longer, however, especially if a major shift has taken place in between. And in Hegel's view, this is exactly what happened: in recent times, there has been an epochal change in the shape of the ethical substance, which essentially resolved the great task of history and elevated philosophy, and science in general, to become the privileged form of knowledge the spirit has of itself. While philosophy was *once* necessarily out of tune with its non-philosophical world, now, after the world has itself become philosophical, philosophy is in principle in line with it.¹¹

In the modern world, philosophy should therefore fully assume the role that transpires from the *Doppelsatz*. As “its time comprehended in thought,” true philosophy is to comprehend

¹⁰ E. Renault developed a reading of what he calls “Hegel's presentism” that comes very close to our own, including in respect to the epochal change in the role of philosophy in the modern time. See Renault 2004 and 2015.

¹¹ The same was affirmed by Jaeschke: “This is the point where the previous relationship between philosophy and actuality is reversed—the relation that philosophical thinking always comes after reality is already complete. Thus world history changes its character after the end of the history of philosophy. Now its content is not the cognition of the principle of freedom, but its realization” (Jaeschke 1984, p. 115).

what is in the present and thereby contribute to its continuous self-sublation. This is not to say that philosophy has essentially become a theory of revolutionary praxis, but it is the place of the self-conscious thought of the actual. In order to perform this function, however, philosophy has to meet at least two requirements. First, since the modern world is itself philosophical, it is only by explicitly wanting to be a child of its time that philosophy can perform its task. True philosophy must now, more than ever, want to reside in what is.¹² And second, and more importantly, along with the modern shift in the shape of the objective spirit, philosophy, too, has to undergo an analogous change in its form. For Hegel, the task of philosophy is “to transform representations into thoughts—and indeed, beyond that, the thought into the concept” (GW 20, § 20R, p. 64; Enc I, p. 52). The major threat accordingly stems from the possibility that philosophy might perform its task only half-way, stopping short at the stage of abstract thought and understanding, which essentially remains enclosed within the same regime of knowledge. It is true that representation is primarily linked to the sensitive material, whose singular determinations appear isolated and external to each other. In Hegel’s view, however, this equally applies to so-called abstract concepts: “In this case, several isolated simple determinations are similarly strung together, remaining outside one another, despite the bond assigned to them in the subject possessing them. Representation here meets with the *understanding*,” (GW 20, § 20R, p. 64; Enc I, p. 52). Abstract thought insofar still stands within the boundaries of representation, and since the latter is the mode of knowledge that is typical of religion, the respective philosophy of understanding could be aptly

¹² The thesis on philosophy always coming too late hereby acquires an additional corroboration. Before the advent of modernity, philosophy was in a structural delay with respect to the world. Now, it still comes too late to issue any instruction on how it should be, but for the opposite reason—because the world now, in principle, already is how it should be.

described as philosophy *under the mark of religion*. For Hegel, the philosophy of understanding is formally authoritarian, religious philosophy. This explains why he was so critical of the Enlightenment, and why he decried the subjective arbitrariness and barbarism that he saw in certain philosophical systems of his time.¹³ Against such phenomena Hegel claimed with particular insistence that philosophy had to go all the way down and transform thoughts into concepts. Only in this way would it finally establish itself as a free science of the modern world.

That philosophy is free of all authority, that it enforces its principle of free thought, independent of all internal and external authority, requires that it has come to the concept of free thought, that it starts from free thought, that this is the principle. (HV 6, p. 303)

If philosophy wants to be on a level with its time, it has to go beyond the religious form of representation. In particular, it has to abandon the standpoint of understanding with its *mos geometricus* and embrace speculative thought, whose concepts inhabit reality. Unless philosophy finally becomes true philosophy, such as Hegel's, a philosophy of the free concept, it will remain external to its world, diverging and deferring the march of

¹³ To be sure, Hegel in no way rejected the political engagement of "enlightened" philosophers, what he deplored was their attachment to abstract understanding, which led them into erroneous battles. For him, the Enlightenment and so-called superstition were two sides of the same coin. This explains why he considered the Church *and* the Enlightenment the two major opponents of true philosophy. "Philosophy has two oppositions. On the one hand, it seems to be opposed to the Church, and it has this in common with education, reflection, that in conceptualization it does not stop at the form of representation [...] However, this opposition is only formal. The second opposition it has against the Enlightenment, against indifference of the content, against opinion, against the despair of giving up the truth [...]" (HV 5, p. 175). For Hegel, the Enlightenment resembled some features of the Christian creed that he considered barbaric because they immediately mixed the highest (the truth revealed in the absolute religion) with the lowest (empty subjectivity, the form of feeling, external authority). See HV 5, p. 267.

the spirit, as was the case with the struggle of the Enlightenment against superstition. And this danger is real.

To conclude, I would claim that Hegel is timely. But we, contemporary philosophers—insofar as we are still entangled in the habits of what Hegel called understanding—it is us that may lag behind Hegel, and consequently also behind our time.

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