Key Elements Pertaining to Hegelian Freedom

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Hegel has analyzed the concept of freedom comprehensively in many of his philosophical works. In doing so, Hegel takes a different position from the liberal and kantian theory by praising the spirit as a different concept to reality and by affirming that the truly free will is an ethical one. Hegel's discourse is built on the succession of events and epochs; in such succession, nations and worlds have contributed to the development of the world spirit toward freedom. Throughout his work the concept of freedom takes a central place in his philosophy and Hegel concludes that the most comprehensive freedom is achieved through philosophical activity.

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Hegel's concept of freedom is very well reflected in the "*Philosophy of Right*" which is anchored into an ethical theory which identifies the human good with the self-actualization of the human spirit. Hegel's name for the essence of this spirit is freedom. In Hegel's acceptance, freedom is not what most people mean by it, namely the possibilities of unlimited acting. In his view, "freedom is a kind of action, namely one in which I am determined entirely through myself, not at all by anything external."[1] For Hegel, an individual is the product of "a determinate social order, he conceives of the human good not abstractly, as the maximizing of pleasures, but as an ethical life providing for the individual's self-actualization as person, subject, family member, burgher, and citizen."[2] This structure reaches its highest point in the political state, because there the structure of social life is consciously known and willed for the sake of its rationality.

Even in the case of free action, Hegel thinks that most people identify it with arbitrariness, with doing whatever we please or with exposing our particularity and ideosyncrasy". Allan W. Wood reaffirms in Introduction to Hegel's "*Philosophy of Right*" that the author regards this view as shallow and immature. The main idea is that we are free only when we overcome particularity and act universally or objectively according to the concept of will."[3] Will Dudley notes that in the Hegelian text willing can be truly free only in virtue of an activity other than itself. "That is, although self-determination of the will is a more comprehensive conception of freedom than unfettered action, it rests yet on another kind of freedom, without which willing fails to be genuinely self-determining."[4] Hence, the strong bond between freedom and philosophy, as the liberating activity that Hegel identifies as the premise of free willing is the practice of philosophy. The concept of freedom becomes the central topic of consideration in philosophy, and this view rests on the idea that the most comprehensive freedom is achieved through philosophical practice. As Dudley, in his book on *Hegel, Nietzsche and Philosophy,* puts it: "Philosophy is the only activity in which spiritual beings are dependent upon nothing other than themselves, [they] have overcome all externality and are no longer subjective or

formal, no longer finite in either sense."[5]

In his "*Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*", Hegel dedicates a chapter to the Enlightenment and Revolution, shifting the discourse to the present time. Hegel's discourse focuses on the idea of a world as the spiritual world of the will. Freed of barriers set to the senses, and other means of spiritual creation, the world is constituted essentially by the will in itself. In Hegel's view, the will is free only if it does not contain impulses or any other particularities. The will can be free only if it does not desire anything. Hegel explains historical processes and events as justified by the existence of the free will. Hegel sees freedom shaped by the course of history; thus, freedom is the result of a long process of historical events and cannot occur in underdeveloped nations or worlds but is shaped and determined by people. Hegel gives as examples Germany and France. He sees the German model in contrast to the French one, by identifying two types of principles: the formal principle of freedom versus the practical principle of freedom. Germany employs the formal principle of freedom which came to life during the Enlightenment period which included theology whereas France is the representative of the practical principle of freedom that went against the interference of religion in the public sphere. Because the French accepted the formal vision on life, the consequence was a major one which resulted in the French Revolution in which Hegel sees the formal principle set free. Hegel justifies the existence of God in History, explaining that nothing happens outside God but everything is His work: "World History is a process of evolution and the true becoming of the spirit in the unstable show of its events , only this is a true justification of God in History. Only that understanding which reconciles the spirit with the world history and the reality which admits that which happens every day or has happened before not only does it happen outside the God but is in essence his work."[6]

Hegel describes freedom as "being with oneself in an other"[7] that is actively relating to something other than oneself in such a way that this other becomes integrated in one's projects, completing and fulfilling them so that it counts as belonging to one's own action rather than standing over against it. This means that freedom is possible only to the extent that we act rationally and only if our actions are in harmony with our reason. As an example, the social order is being mentioned by Hegel. In Hegel's philosophical system, "individual human psychology belongs to the field of subjective spirit and the rational society."[8] Hegel's vision of being with oneself and simultaneously being in this other means a limitation of freedom. Christi Renato notes in *Freedom and Authority* that "the presence of this other introduces a determining, authoritative element that is external to the self. By advancing to the third unifying moment, Hegel intended to reconcile the free self with the determining other."[9] Karl Loewith noticed in his famous work *From Hegel to Nietzsche : The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought* that Hegel's historical relativism begins and ends with absolute knowledge in which every "stage of the unfolding of the spirit is a mark of progress in consciousness of freedom; the knowledge of the sciences is not even relative, for there is no measuring stick by which to evaluate the temporal process. All that is left to the spirit is the spirit of the age. But yet, even if only to be able to understand the age as an age, a point of view is necessary which will transcend the bare events of an age."[10] Hence, the ultimate question arises whether the essence and meaning of history are determined absolutely from within history itself or not. Loewith acknowledges the fact that Hegel's viewpoint raises more questions which will eventually be answered by his followers. Hegel's system is a comprehensive one, his appreciation is that freedom can be possible therefore only in a rational society where institutions can be preceived as rational by the public who is with itself in the boundaries of these institutions. Hegel identifies as a free rational society the one where the demands of social life do not interfere in a negative way the needs of the individuals, in such a way that duty fulfils each person's individuality rather than suppress it.

In the Chapter dedicated to the *Freedom of Willing: Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Will Dudley identifies Hegel's perception of limited freedom very well: "Our freedom requires that our particular interests be limited, but it also requires that we understand that this limitation is in our own interest, and that we therefore understand the limitation to be self-imposed."[11] Thus humans can feel free only if they impose limitations to their actions and when they fully comprehend these limitations. Allan Wood mentions that "in such a society rational individuals can promote their interest to a satisfactory degree without having to maximize it, and they don't need to make great sacrifices in order to give priority to right and duty or to show concerns for the good of others. Because our social life is in harmony with our individuality, the duties of ethical life do not limit our freedom but actualize it. Once we realize this we perceive to be with ourselves in our ethical duties"[12].

Hegel continues the argumentation saying that when we become conscious of this we owe to be with ourselves in our ethical duties. Such duties, according to Hegel, do not restrict us but liberate us. In Hegel's philosophical system a person is free only when he can identify himself with the institutions and his community, feeling to be a part of them and perceiving them to be a part of one's self. Still, for Hegel, there is one more ingredient which has to be present in order to perceive such feelings as freedom. Such feelings have to be a certainty based on truth. In this sense the institutions of the community must reflect both the

state's general interest with the true, objective benefit of individuals and the individuals must be conscious of this relationship.

In Hegel's "*Elements of the Philosophy of Right*" we learn that free thinking is not being stopped at what is given, be it that the given object is supported by the authority of the state or by the authority of inner feeling, but instead starts from itself and thereby demands to "know itself as united in its innermost being with the truth. [...]."[13] Hegel recognizes that full freedom can be achieved when the individuals which are part of a society admit that there is a will to which all members of the society have to obey. In John Dewey's viewpoint this recognition represents the "transition to the universal self-consciousness which is the substance of every social organization." [14] Freedom is achieved when reason is present and this can only happen if the individual's consciousness is in unity with all individual forms of consciousness. The self consciousness has to learn that the true unity is achieved through unity of particular selves.

Hegel states the following about reflections in the ethical world: "The spiritual universe is supposed rather to be at the mercy of contingency and arbitrariness, to be god-forsaken, so that, according to this atheism of the ethical world, truth lies outside it, and at the same time, since reason is nevertheless also supposed to be present in it, truth is nothing but a problem. But we are told, this very circumstance justifies, indeed obliges, every thinker to take his own initiative, though not in search of the philosoher's stone, for this search is made superfluous by the philosophizing of our times and everyone, whatever his condition, can be assured that he has this stone in his grasp. "[15] In reality there are within the state people who find true satisfaction, volition and knowledge and find themselves in full agreement with the way the state is, but Hegel recognizes that such people find themselves amused by the idea of taking initiative.

In his "*Introduction to the Philosophy of Right*", Hegel defines the concept of freedom: "the unity of existence and the concept, the body and soul, is the Idea. It is not just a harmony, but a complete interpenetration. Nothing lives which is not in some way Idea. The Idea of right is freedom, and in order to be truly apprehended it must be recognizable in its concept and in the concept's existence"[16]. In Hegel's view, a person is free from the beginning, but in order to become free he has to realize his freedom. This process of realizing one's freedom is far from being an abstract concept out of reach for most of us. In fact "this realization, however, is no reaching for something beyond which man merely ought to be, it is the continued free movement of taking home to himself that which he already is in principle."[17]Hegel continues the flow of thoughts stating that the basis of right is the realm of spirit in general and its precise location and point of departure is the will; the will is free, so that "freedom constitutes its substance and destiny and the system of right is the realm of actualized freedom, the world of spirit produced from within itself as a second nature."[18] In other words: "freedom is just as much a basic determination of the will as weight is a basic determination of bodies. If matter is described as heavy, one might think that this predicate is merely contingent; but this is not so, for nothing in matter is weightless: on the contrary, matter is weight itself. Heaviness constitutes the body and is the body. It is the same way with freedom and the will, for that which is free is the will. Will without freedom is an empty word, just as freedom is actual only as will or as subject."[19] The correlation between freedom and will is achieved by comparing the relationship between body and weight versus will and freedom. Thus, there is no freedom without a will and there is no body without a weight. Will is free in its own nature.

Regarding the connection which exists between the will and the thought, Hegel says that spirit is thought in general and that the human being is distinguished from the animal by thought.

The distinction between thought and will is simply that between theoretical and practical attitudes and they are not two different faculties; the will is a particular way of thinking, thinking translating itself into existence, thinking as the drive to give itself existence.

Hegel distinguishes between negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom is the freedom of the understanding, the freedom of void raised to the status of an actual shape and passion. If it remains purely theoretical it takes the form of contemplation (as in the Hindu fanaticism) but if it turns to actuality it can take the form destruction, demolishing the whole existing social order. Only in destroying something does this negative will have a feeling of its own existence. This form of freedom exists according to Hegel predominantly in history. "The Hindus place the highest value on mere persistence in the knowledge of one's identity with oneself,, on remaining within this empty space of one's inwardness like colourless light in pure intuition, and on renouncing every activity of life, every end, and every representation. In this way, the human being becomes Brahman. There is no longer any distinction between the finite human being and Brahman; instead every difference has disappeared in this universality. This form of freedom appears more concretely in the active fanaticism of both political and religious life. An example of this was the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution, during which all differences of talents and authority were supposed to be cancelled. For fanaticism wills only what is abstract, not what is articulated, so that whenever differences emerge, it finds them incompatible with its own indeterminacy



Georg Wilhem Friedrich Hegel
Sursă foto: https://rosswolfe.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/7458_georg_wilhelm_friedrich_hegel-1.jpg

and cancels them."[20] In his lectures on the "*Philosophy of World History*", Hegel identifies different existing ways of treating history, distinguishing between the unmediated, the reflected and the philosophical history. Using the concept of freedom, Hegel makes an analysis of the history as a whole and analyzes the existing forms of government specific to universal history before analyzing the different European countries. Thus, he explains the despotic form of governance, the democracy and aristocracy and the monarchy as a last form of governance. His discourse is centered around the superiority of the monarchy in general and of the German monarchy in particular. Hegel sees in the German spirit the best form of governance: "The world consists of both the physical and psychic nature, the physical nature intervenes in the universal history and we will draw attention from the start on the fundamental conditions of nature determination. The main element consists of the spirit and the course of its development. [...] freedom is the only truth belonging to the spirit."[21]

Freedom is to will something determinate, yet to be with oneself in this determinacy and to return once more to the universal. "The common man thinks he is free when he is allowed to act arbitrarily, but this very arbitrariness implies that he is not free. When I will what is rational, I act not as a particular individual, but in accordance with the concepts of ethics in general: in an ethical act, I vindicate not myself but the thing."[22] Modern individuals not only regard themselves as arbitrarily free choosers, but they also see themselves as giving meaning to their lives through the particular choices they make. Thus, individuals are regarded as subjects and their subjectivity enters the sphere of morality, in which individuals measure their choices by universal standards and reflect on their actions based on their conscience. The subject's freedom represents the "being with oneself in an other", where the other represents the individual's own actions and choices. The philosopher Will Dudley captures the essence of Hegel's words by describing in detail Hegel's perception of free spiritual beings as such because spiritual beings are free because they are thinking beings and they appear to be self sufficient and opposed to each other: "through philosophy spiritual beings free themselves"[23].

In Hegel's viewpoint modern individuals can acquire freedom only if the social institutions provide for subjective freedom in a certain way. A

modern ethical life must provide for the subject self satisfaction by enabling people to shape and actualize their own determinate individualities. The state has to respect the individual's right to direct his own life, and provide for this right in the form of institutions. It is the state's duty to honor moral conscience and to hold the individual responsible for his actions only in as far as they represent one's own subjectivity. If a state fails to do this things, then that state is a state where individuals can't be free. Hegelian freedom is closely linked to freedom in the ordinary sense. John Dewey's *Lecture on Hegel* synthesizes Hegel's view on the state in its essence: "The State is then the completed objective spirit, the externalized reason of man; it reconciles the principle of law and liberty, not by bringing some truce or external harmony between them, but by making the law of the whole the prevailing interest and controlling motive of the individual."[24]

Moreover, Hegel's theory based on ethics shows why freedom in the ordinary sense is objectively a good thing for people. In doing so, Hegel points out the line which distinguishes between the freedom as an objectively valuable asset and freedom which lacks a positive side. Hegel notes that freedom is only then valuable when it belongs to the rightful sphere of some person or when it leads to the subject's individuality. If doing as you please does not result in positive effects, such freedom has no value at all. Hegel names certain things which are part of a person's personality and thus are a part of our basic rights: the right to our own body and free status, the right to hold private property and the right over one's own ethical life, religion and conscience. "These goods, or rather substantial determinations, which constitute my own distinct personality and the universal essence of my self-consciousness are therefore inalienable, and my right to them is imprescriptible. They include my personality in general, my universal freedom of will, ethical life, and religion."[25]

Hegel continues with the idea that our rights as persons have validity only when they become the expression of law. Hegel states that positive laws are obligatory only if they agree in content with what is in itself right. Hegel thinks that some laws, for instance those which establish slavery or those which forbid people to hold a private property are plainly unjust.

"Examples of alienation of personality include slavery, serfdom, disqualification from owning property, restrictions on freedom of ownership. The alienation of intelligent morality, ethical life, and religion is encountered in superstition, when power and authority are granted to others to determine and prescribe what actions I should perform or how I should interpret the dictates of conscience, religious truth, etc. The right to such inalienable things is imprescriptable, for the act whereby I take possession of my personality and substantial essence and make myself a responsible being with moral and religious values and capable of holding rights removes these determinations from that very externality which alone made them capable of becoming the possessions of someone else."[26]

The idea that results from the Hegelian texts is that the only real guarantee of freedom is a well constituted ethical life. A guarantee of freedom means that the rights of person are part of a system of customs and institutions which provide individuals with fulfilling lives. A threat to freedom in the modern world is the tendency by which individuals withdraw too far into subjectivity because of becoming alienated from the social life. In this way the individuals cannot be with themselves in their social life. The modern state has certain characteristics which separate it decisively from other less developed social orders. Hegel introduces the term civil society for both the concept of family and the state. Civil society is a modern concept in which individuals exist as persons and subjects, as owners and dispensers of private property, with the possibilities of choosing their own life activity according to their needs. Hegel believes that a state-run economy is a premodern institution, incompatible with the modern principle of individual freedom. As a member of this society, individuals have the duty to support themselves through labor which benefits the whole and the civil society has the duty to provide equal opportunities which lead to a secure, respectable selffulfilling way of living.

Even if Hegel's thoughts reflect the reality of the 19th century, Hegel's philosophy may not be dated at all. Allen W. Wood remarks that "Hegel's conception of modern human beings, their history, their needs and aspirations and their general social conditions required for self-actualization"[27] remains unsurpassed. Hegel points out the necessity for modern humanity to have concrete social standards and integration and to remind us that we cannot be free unless our social life is selftransparent. Hegel is also current because the same aspirations which were actual in Hegel's time remain radically unfullfilled.

Notes:

1. GWF Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right. Or Natural Law and Political Science in Outline*. UK:Cambridge University Press, Ed by Allen W Wood , Trans by H Nisbet, 1991, chapter 23, p.106.
2. Allan Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 29.
3. GWF Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right. Or Natural Law and Political Science in Outline*, UK:Cambridge University Press, Ed by Allen W Wood , Trans by H Nisbet, 1991, p 106.
4. Will Dudley, *Hegel, Nietzsche, and Philosophy. Thinking*

Freedom, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p.116.
5. Will Dudley, *Hegel, Nietzsche, and Philosophy. Thinking Freedom*. UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p.116.
6. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* from the Romanian translation "Prelegeri de filozofie a istoriei" chapter 2, p. 183.
7. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, Translated by A.V.Miller and Foreword by J.N. Findley, 1977 chapter 383, p. 266
8. Ibid. Chapter 385, p. 267.
9. Cristi Renato, *Hegel on Freedom and Authority*, Edited by Howard Williams, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006, p. 46.
10. Karl Loewith , *From Hegel to Nietzsche. The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought,* Transl. by David Green, New York:Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 16.
11. Will Dudley, *Hegel, Nietzsche, and Philosophy. Thinking Freedom*, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p.72.
12. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right. Or Natural Law and Political Science in Outline*. UK:Cambridge University Press, Ed by Allen W Wood , Trans by H Nisbet, 1991, p. 255.
13. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right. Or Natural Law and Political Science in Outline*. UK:Cambridge University Press, Ed by Allen W Wood , Trans by H Nisbet, 1991, ch.149, p. 244.
14. J. Shook and J.Good, *John Dewey's Philosophy of Spirit, with the 1897 Lecture on Hegel*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2010, p. 137.
15. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Or Natural Law and Plotical Science in Outline, p. 244.
16. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right. Or Natural Law and Political Science in Outline*, p. 249.
17. J. Shook and J.Good. *John Dewey's Philosophy of Spirit, with the 1897 Lecture on Hegel*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010, p. 148.
18. G.W.F. Hegel. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right. Or Natural Law and Political Science in Outline*. UK:Cambridge University Press, Ed by Allen W Wood , Trans by H Nisbet, 1991, ch. 187.
19. Ibid. Chapter187.
20. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right. Or Natural Law and Political Science in Outline*. UK:Cambridge University Press, Ed by Allen W Wood , Trans by H Nisbet, 1991, ch.187.
21. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* from the Romanian translation "Prelegeri de filozofie a istoriei chapter 2, p.41.
22. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right. Or Natural Law and Political Science in Outline*. UK:Cambridge University Press, Ed by Allen W Wood , Trans by H Nisbet, 1991, ch.185, p. 277
23. Will Dudley, *Hegel, Nietzsche, and Philosophy. Thinking Freedom*, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 117.
24. J. Shook and J.Good. *John Dewey's Philosophy of Spirit, with the 1897 Lecture on Hegel*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010, p. 137.
25. GW Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right. Or Natural Law and Political Science in Outline*. UK:Cambridge University Press, Ed by Allen W Wood , Trans by H Nisbet, 1991, ch.66, p.95.
26. GW Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right. Or Natural Law and Political Science in Outline*. UK:Cambridge University Press, Ed by Allen W Wood , Trans by H Nisbet, 1991, ch.66, p. 66.
27. GW Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Or Natural Law and Political Science in Outline. UK:Cambridge University Press, Ed by Allen W Wood , Trans by H Nisbet, 1991, ch.66.

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