

TWO CONCEPTS OF SPIRIT IN HEGEL

Kenneth Smith

It is cause for reflection that so many disparate ideological strains—Marxism, fascism, liberalism—trace back to the Hegelian philosophy, and particularly anomalous that even perspectives in diametrical opposition claim a Hegelian derivation. Out of the Hegelian matrix was refined not only a communitarian foundation—which we see in Marx, Gentile, Royce, and others—but a more individualistic orientation which we may know from the writings of Weber, Foster, Habermas, Riedel, and others. The communitarian perspective has tended to reduce ego, conscience, and other paraphernalia of individuality to intersubjective and historical factors, while the individualist perspective has regarded just these structures of individuality as ultimate and irreducible. There is grave disagreement involved here: the status of civil or bourgeois society and its categories of legal responsibility, within which individuals are related to one another merely qua individuals, has become extremely problematic.

It is no novel thesis to observe, with respect to the communitarian and individualistic worldviews, that Hegel's syntheses have broken down: the mediation linking objective and subjective spirit (or, as Löwith termed it, "the two extremes of internal and external"¹) has lapsed in virtually all of the post-Hegelian social theorists. The commensurability Hegel seemed to discover between the orders of subjectivity and intersubjectivity has become much more chimerical to us, precisely to the extent that subjectivity has delved further into arbitrariness and irrationality and the world of intersubjective relations has grown more oppressive and alien. The coordination of these dimensions seems less and less plausible because contemporary forms of individuality and community do not have any longer the traditional value of being naturally or teleologically interdependent. The two dimensions seem eminently abstractable from one another in theory, as indeed their antagonistic relations seem to create repulsion between the dimensions in practice.

It is not our purpose to survey this diremption in general. We are seeking clues to enable us to reclaim the coordination

that these dimensions found in Hegel's arguments. As we shall see, individuality and communality are not themselves the philosophically precise terms of those arguments: Hegel's theory obliges us to reconstruct the notions of individuality and communality in terms of more primordial concepts, so that, from these introductory orientations, we must understand that we have not yet penetrated to the "two concepts of spirit" whose dialectical interplay may provide a more exact appreciation of our post-Hegelian dilemmas.

A prime clue in identifying pivotal differences may be taken from the subsequent ideological appropriations of Hegel's philosophy of social subjectivity. Among the reversals and revaluations Hegel's career has undergone, almost none is more astonishing than the liberal or libertarian (individualist) restoration of Hegelian doctrine: renowned as the theorist of the organic state, virtually a neo-Aristotelian critic of Kantian and Platonic abstractionism and universalism, Hegel seems extraordinarily ill-cast as an advocate of individualist-Kantian autonomy of the will. Yet, in a strikingly clear essay,² Manfred Riedel has worked prodigiously to assimilate Hegel to the Kantian and Fichtean models of subjectivity (man interpreted as rational will): throughout, Riedel takes his bearings from a modal dichotomy between nature and spirit, and insists (from a Kantian standpoint) on the opposition between laws of necessity and laws of freedom. The laws of freedom, having no validity transcending human will, are conceived almost Sophistically as artificial: "normative laws" are said to be "laid down ('posited,' *gesetzt*), they originate with man and depend upon his will and consciousness."³ Drawing upon a somewhat vague metaphysical contrast, Riedel cites what seems to be the Hegelian rendering of a Kantian dualism: "We oppose spirit to matter. Just as weight is the substance of matter, so we are moved to say that freedom is the substance of spirit."⁴ Riedel's arguments are directed toward the vindication of a form of social order in which all relations originate in the freedom of the will and nature is systematically invalidated as a basis for rights or obligations: this concept of society we recognize as contractualism, not significantly different from the views Aristotle attributes to Lycophron the Sophist (*Politics* III.ix) or the arguments of modern anarchists such as Godwin or Nozick. Riedel points in conclusion to the

contrast between this libertarian schematization and the reality of natural necessitation by which capitalist economy thwarts the concept of will.

Riedel's argument is open to a number of objections. Evidence for the centrality of the principle of freedom is drawn from *The Philosophy of History* without regard for countervailing evidence that Hegel consistently desired to qualify the validity of freedom: that freedom is necessary but not sufficient; that it is an invariant condition but not a fertile principle is recognized as a far more typically Hegelian position. Hegel's critique of abstract freedom is well-recounted by J.-F. Suter's essay⁵ in the same volume as Riedel's, and the contrast between Hegelian and liberal concepts of rights is securely documented in a recent article⁶ by Peter Stillman. Without desiring to cover that ground again, let it suffice that Riedel has imposed an altogether too antagonistic relation between will and nature: Hegel allows that the specific determination of the will to some act—the resolution of the will that translates it from mere potency (self-relation) to actuality, that is, without which the will is not complete—requires a concreteness of content that can, indifferently, be produced by subjectivity itself or by something else (*Philosophy of Right*, para. 7). Criticism of abstract freedom ("negative freedom, or freedom as the Understanding conceives it," para. 5; ". . . will is thinking reason resolving itself to finitude," para. 13; and, to the Kantians, ". . . freedom is nothing else but this empty self-activity," the illusory freedom of arbitrariness, para. 15; and so on) abounds so evidently throughout the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right* that we cannot imagine Hegel to be endorsing the unqualified validity of abstract right or the individuality of civil society.

It is not, however, at the level of controversies in social-political theories that we want to define the issues that obstruct a contemporary appreciation of Hegel's coordination between subjectivity and intersubjectivity. It is our suspicion that a misconception at a prior level of argument has obliged Riedel to endorse that abstractionist, merely negative species of freedom which Hegel enjoined. This misconception revolves around the metaphysical status, the specific ontological modality, in accordance with which spirit is to be construed. The passages Riedel cites in illustration of the polarity

between nature and spirit are interesting not only for the way in which they refract Kantian metaphysics but for their anticipation of the vitalism of Nietzsche and Bergson. Still, these metaphorically charged polarities of gravity and freedom hardly represent Hegel's most considered statements about the distinctive modalities of nature and spirit. The relation between these two metaphysical regions—the world of nature and the world of spirit—is consistent in all contexts within Hegel's arguments, and this equivocation is illuminating not only with respect to Riedel's misrepresentations but with regard to the duality of spirit that we hope to define.

Hegel's expression of the most fundamental ontological contrasts between nature and spirit takes a double form: the ontology of nature describes the realm of *Äussersichsein*, or being-outside-of-itself, an order in which there is a mutual exclusiveness among all of its elements. Nature is a domain of mutual repulsion, dispersion, and externality in time as in space:

The infinite divisibility of matter simply means that matter is external to itself. The immeasurableness of Nature . . . is precisely this same externality. Because each material point seems to be entirely independent of all the others, a failure to hold fast to the Notion prevails in Nature which is unable to bring together its determinations. . . . It is only in *life* that we meet with subjectivity and the counter to externality. The heart, liver, eye, are not self-subsistent individualities on their own account, and the hand, when separated from the body, putrefies. The organic body is still a whole composed of many members external to each other; but each individual member exists only in the subject, and the Notion exists as the power over these members. . . . The spatiality of the organism has no truth whatever for the soul. . . .⁷

We also find nature characterized as *Ansichsein*, being-in-itself, an order in which every member has strict unity with itself. Every natural form of being is governed by the kind of immediacy (self-identity or self-coincidence) which allows us to say that it is what it is and is not what it is not; natural entities

are subject to the law of excluded middle in a way that spirit is not.

The subsistence or substance of anything that exists is its self-identity; for its want of identity, or oneness with itself, would be its dissolution.⁸

That which is confined to a life of nature is unable of itself to go beyond its immediate existence; but by something other than itself it is forced beyond that; and to be thus wrenched out of its setting is its death. Consciousness, however, is to itself its own notion; thereby it immediately transcends what is limited, and since this latter belongs to it, consciousness transcends its own self. . . . Consciousness, therefore, suffers this violence at its own hands; it destroys its own limited satisfaction.⁹

For our purposes these passages require exegesis.

The first concept of nature, as the medium of extension or dispersion, imposes on nature a regime of dissolution: nature is essentially and everywhere contaminated by relations, by differences which are only made explicit by the futile effort to fix a unitary Here and Now. Nature is this medium of spatio-temporal extendedness, contrasting precisely with the remarkable power of spirit as a principle of unity (prefigured at the organic level): we may say, as *The Philosophy of History* does, that thought is indeed "the most trenchant epitomist,"¹⁰ for it alone in the centrifugal world of nature has the distinction of being a centripetal force. Thought alone has the privilege of concentrating significance: in art, philosophy, or religion, it can draw explicit themes out of the chaos of experience; it can reduce experience and understanding to a contractive essence, whereas nature can only offer us the bad infinite of expansiveness and change, the interminable dilative process of ostensive definition. Over against this order of finitude or mutual exclusiveness, spirit represents the principle of integrative infinity: spirit is a whole, and wholeness describes not merely the status of spirit but its activity—spirit encompasses, digests, comprehends in such a way that even the most antagonistic contents are commensurable with one another in thought.

This wholeness describes perhaps the most prominent motive principle in Hegel's philosophy: spirit, at whatever stage it has consolidated its powers, experiences an irresistible urge toward integrity—it must raise its implicit presuppositions to the form of explicit theses, resolve contradictions, subsume heterogeneous laws under a unified field of understanding, and so on. This imperative niss toward comprehensiveness—toward the formularization and systematization of understanding—appears historically in every human culture as what Hegel calls "science." Natural entities also attempt to maintain their integrity, but the significant modal difference is that this can be done in nature only by the function of exclusion or opposition, the externality between finite identities: unlike nature which is wholly subjugated to the principle of ontological non-contradiction, spirit is endowed with an *überreichend* privilege of inclusion and incorporation—spirit is the *Aufhebung* of itself and its opposite, spirit *contains* negativity in a way that no natural being can. We must disabuse ourselves of the ordinary pictorialization of infinitude—whether as an interminable series or as a "beyond" that is opposed to finitude—to appreciate that the in-finite is related to the finite: the true and consistent concept of infinitude involves a different relation altogether, one of inclusion.¹¹ It is in virtue of this modality that spirit can take the form of consciousness, subjectivity gifted with intentionality: this self-transcending directedness to its other enables the other to be incorporated within a subjective relation yet not be deprived of its independence and transcendence over the subjective medium. Without this modality, spirit would fall apart into a mere medium, external to its object; the referentiality of subjective contents would be lost, and the possibility of objective knowledge (the coincidence of subjective certainty and objective truth) would be unsalvageable in the face of a dichotomy between immanentist idealism and transcendent realism.

The second concept of nature, as *Ansichsein*, also represents a modal contrast with spirit; nature is ontological immediacy, a mode of being that is *mere* being, without any internal relations to itself. Nature here is dimensional simplicity, impoverished precisely in that it lacks all of the properly spiritual spectrum of being in which we must factor in

the significance of the mode more than once. *Mediated* being, of whatever degree of mediation, must take into account what it is, must adopt attitudes to itself: it lives in the midst of self-reflection and self-relation. These higher, reflected modes describe a spiraling structure of superimposed self-relations, a concrescence of overlapping *Aufhebungen* in which each succeeding integration is founded upon the more primitive modes whose inconsistencies and incompleteness it resolves. In contrast with the previous notion of nature as *Äussersichsein*, nature as self-identical *Ansichsein* is free of internal differences and the interminable divisibility of the external order. Spirit has here the character of a relational being, its unity or identity established by mediation, that is, only as a result *ex post facto* of a process: spirit's identity, unlike nature's, is tempered with difference—identity is not given immediately but achieved via the resolution of disparities and conflicts. Where *Äussersichsein* was throughout permeated with differences (like the infinitely divisible nature of Zeno or of analytically methodical modern science), nature from the perspective of *Ansichsein* is modally a holistic ultimate, a pre-reflective and pre-critical modality (like Parmenidean Being or Spinozist Substance) to which methods of analysis cannot penetrate.

Nature in this second sense is imbued with that kind of apodictic validity that, for Aristotle, placed the objects of theorizing beyond the domain of contingency and practical variability. Over against this apodictic-substantial immediacy of nature conceived as *Ansichsein*, spirit shows a face we did not see in its status as infinite unity: spirit is again a radically unnatural power, but it is the awful power of the negative that is exhibited over against *Ansichsein*. The subject is seen to be:

truly realized and actual solely in the process of positing itself, or in mediating with its own self its transitions from one state or position to the opposite. As subject it is pure and simple negativity, and just on that account a process of splitting up what is simple and undifferentiated. . . .¹²

It is not nature but spirit that has the power of dissociation and decomposition:

The action of separating the elements is the exercise of the force of Understanding, the most astonishing and greatest of all powers, or rather the absolute power. . . . That an accident as such, when cut loose from its containing circumference—that what is bound and held by something else and actual only by being connected with it—should obtain an existence all its own, gain freedom and independence on its own account—this is the portentous power of the negative; it is the energy of thought, of pure ego.¹³

It is nature here which is the whole, and spirit the exception: spirit alone has the contranatural privilege of liberating itself from the mode of necessity (the immediacy that obliges natural being to be nothing other than what it is). Within the monolithic order of natural *Ansichsein*, spirit's formidable power of abstraction (the conceptual and practical isolation of factors from their context) creates exceptions to the general reign of natural necessitation. In virtue of the potency of the negative—its power to exclude, to divide and decompose—spirit makes itself exempt from the static structures of natural self-identity: spirit invokes upon itself the privilege of developmental identity, the self-transformation which we call historical being. Unlike the infinite unity of spirit understood as a being which is at every moment the sum of its parts and phases, this negative face of spirit is radically incomplete, an irresolvable process. We may detect in the *prima facie* conflict between these forms of spirit not only the tension between absolute spirit and dialectical process but the friction between communal union and individual freedom: is there conceptual equivocation between Hegel's two presentations of spirit, each with its own correlative form of nature? Is it possible for spirit to be, at the same time, the pre-eminent principle of unity and the power of radicalized negativity?

We certainly observe these two principles collaborating with one another in the Hegelian dialectic: the divisions and dichotomies introduced by negativity (doubt and analysis) are repeatedly healed as infinite spirit insinuates a superior unity to replace the one that has fallen victim to dissociation. The cycles of the dialectic show us only in part a "highway of despair" as each level of naivete is criticized and disillusioned;

