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*Critique: Hegel and
Contemporary Critical Theory*

Edited by Giovanna Luciano
and Armando Manchisi

G. Andreozzi, M.G. de Moura, M. Gante,
P. García Cherep, F. Gregoratto, G. Hindrichs,
H. Ikäheimo, M. Lopes Miranda, A.L. Prestifilippo,
A.I. Segatto, E. Starbuck Little, G. Zanotti

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OUR TIME COMPREHENDED IN THOUGHTS – HEGEL, HUMANITY, AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

by Heikki Ikäheimo*

***Abstract.** In this article I argue that the currently ongoing epochal changes are bringing about a shift in concerns and saliences that are pushing Hegel-reception in a direction that can be characterized as anthropological or humanist. Three default assumptions making particular perspectives to Hegel more, or less, enticing are on the retreat: Kantian constructivism or subjectivism, historical or cultural relativism, and the ‘ethical abstinence’ of liberal political thought. What will, or should, take their place are a rehabilitated realism, a rehabilitated universalism, and an urgent interest in philosophical means for evaluating and debating better and worse forms of human life across cultural and other differences. I will elaborate on three basic principles crucial to grasp for a Hegelian critical social philosophy fit for purpose in the new crisis-ridden era: multiplicity of levels of conceptual abstraction, realism about freedom, and the cognitive constitution of all human life as a ‘fundamental ethics’.*

Keywords. Hegel; Social Critique; Recognition; Freedom; Ethical Universalism

1. Introduction: The changing of times

The changing of times always affects the ways we read the classics of philosophy. This is especially true of Hegel whose philosophy is so closely bound up with the changing of times, both by being originally a conscious response to the social, political and existential concerns arising from the changes that were taking place in his lifetime, and also by influencing changes that took place after his death. Each era will read Hegel from the point of view of the concerns and consequent saliences prevalent in that era. What we are currently witnessing is a major shift in concerns and saliences, and it is no surprise if this will cause a shift in the reception of Hegel, a shift which, arguably, is already underway.

* UNSW Sydney

The shift in concerns and saliences that I have in mind has two components which independently might have had somewhat different consequences, but which taking place simultaneously create a certain cultural and mental constellation which differs radically from the one that preceded it, and which together are pushing Hegel-reception to a direction that can be characterized as *anthropological or humanist*. To speak Hegelian, one component of this shift concerns the ways we look at relations constitutive of the realm of spirit, whereas the other concerns our view of the relationship between that realm and the realm of nature.

In the ‘inner-spiritual’ front, the previous shift, lamented by many, from social imagination and thought guided by the broadly Marxist concerns of economic injustice to questions of identity has been in reversal since the Global Financial Crisis in 2008. Though there are many ways in which Marxist and identity-political approaches are being amalgamated in contemporary social and political thought and though most would agree that any rejuvenated Marxism has to take on board lessons from the debates and theorizing on identity, the general balance of interest is shifting from politics of identity and difference towards broadly Marxist concerns. Capitalism is back as a serious topic of discussion in the mainstream, rather than just the margins, and there is a widespread awakening also to the dark sides of demands and politics of identity, something that many warned us about decades ago¹.

The other component of the shift I am talking about concerns the relationship of humanity to nature, or the nature-spirit-relation to speak Hegelian. There is a long arch of human evolution from a struggle of immediate survival in and with external nature, through increasing domestication of and mastery over it, to the vanishingly brief period in certain parts of the planet where significant parts of the population have been able to forget, or push out of their minds

¹ See, for example, K.A. Appiah, *Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction*, in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. by A. Gutmann, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 149-163; N. Fraser, *Rethinking Recognition*, «New Left Review», III, 2000, pp. 107-120. See also the next note.

the fact that the origin of the food on their tables is not in the supermarket, that the water in their taps depends on environmental conditions that are not a given, and that the consumer goods arriving at their doorsteps are a condensation of a mind-bogglingly complex system – a system that extracts huge amounts of natural resources and emits huge amounts of pollution back to nature, and which in the foreseeable future is likely to crumble, partly due to its utter dependence on natural conditions that are now changing because of the pressure from that very system, and partly due to massive geo-political changes taking place simultaneously. With wild-fires raging around the planet in 2019-20, with a zoonotic spill-over causing a global pandemic in 2020 which shut down social life to various degrees for two years in the lands of the luxurious forgetfulness, and with a major war starting in Europe in 2022 which may be only a prelude to coming wars over dwindling natural and human resources², that forgetfulness has now ended with a rude awakening.

What I am suggesting is that these developments together, and the shift in concerns and saliences that they create, are inevitably affecting the default assumptions which make particular perspectives to Hegel more and others less appealing or relevant. I see at least three such general perspectives, or sets of premises, through which it has felt natural for many to read and utilize Hegel in recent decades, and which are now on a retreat or giving way to new approaches. These are – in no particular order – *Kantian constructivism or subjectivism*, *historicism or cultural relativism*, and the ‘*ethical abstinence*’ of liberal political thought.

To start with the first mentioned theme, the default plausibility of *the Kantian transcendental framework* has been a somewhat suppressed bone of contention in the concerned parts of the academia,

² Though this is not the place to discuss the currently ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is worth noting that its initial causes may have as much to do with a desire to secure an advantageous geostrategic position in anticipation of scarcity of natural and (given contemporary population pyramids in Russia and elsewhere) human resources in the near future as with post-imperial identity-trauma, messianistic delusions, cynical political calculation, or other motives.

with some finding the basic Kantian tenets – Newtonian causal determinism about the empirical world including ourselves, the transcendental subject, the subjectivity of time and space and of the intelligibility of the world – as complete non-starters, while others being much more sanguine about them. What I am interested here is not engaging in the endless and convoluted debates about these issues. I am rather suggesting – not to put too fine a point on it – that the metaphysical image of the empirical world as an ordered whole being an appearance, its basic structures a projection of a transcendental subjectivity, seems less intuitively enticing to the non-escapist when that world is raging around us in apocalyptic walls of flames, when it is threatening to bury our homes under ocean waves, or when it is heating our cities unliveable hot or reducing them to rubble with artillery shells and missiles, than it may sound in times when the pressures of the empirical world to philosophical imagination are less urgent or immediately threatening³.

A similar point can be made of the Kantian idea of freedom as autonomy or self-legislation to the extent that it is understood as instituting a spiritual world ‘spinning without friction’ (to borrow the famous metaphor by John McDowell) from natural determinations. Again not going into philosophical fineties, in light of the signs of the times, this idea rhymes uncomfortably with the forgetfulness or fantasy of abstract freedom from nature in which the fabulously privileged section of humanity has had the luxury of living for the brief period of time which is now ending. It is becoming overwhelmingly clear that thinking of the world of objective spirit as a *sui generis* realm normatively isolated from the natural realm – a socialized and historicized version of the Kantian transcendental image – is not a framework on which it is healthy to base our thinking about human civilization. And I do mean *healthy* in the literal sense of population level physical health, well-being and survival. Hegel never ceased to emphasize the potentially

³ Needless to say, this is not a philosophical argument. There is obviously no logical reason why the Kantian framework could not accommodate, say, an ecocatastrophy or genocidal war.

destructive or deadly practical consequences of the concept of abstract freedom, and this construal of autonomy – let us be clear about it – is a version of abstract freedom⁴.

As for *historicism or cultural relativism*, with the return of capitalism with its alleged universal laws, with economic justice and injustice again gaining ground recently dominated by ethnic, sexual and other issues of identity and difference in political agendas and theoretical imaginations, with the mentioned dramatic awakening to the universal fact of humanity's dependence on nature, and with the bitter return of geopolitics, it is inevitably becoming again respectable in critical social thought to attend to determinations of human life that hold for all human societies and individuals independently of historical and cultural differences. Though cultures and historical epochs differ in myriads of ways from each other, none of them can avoid certain universal constitutive factors or features of the human condition, including, but not limited to, dependence on favourable environmental conditions and successful metabolic processes with these. One can always focus on particular features that distinguish particular cultures or historical epochs, or particular human societies or life-worlds – and thus on differentiating 'identities' – or then one can focus on determinants and features that hold for all of them. It is safe to say that given the changing of times that we are living through, the latter focus is rapidly gaining in attention and respectability. Given this shifting constellation, it is unsurprising that *philosophical anthropology* is experiencing a rehabilitation as an academic field of inquiry to be taken seriously. It is also fitting that *social ontology*, which inquires into the ontological deep structures of all human societies and forms of co-existence, has in the last few years experienced a rapid growth into a very active sub-field of contemporary philosophy⁵.

⁴ See L. Gleeson and H. Ikäheimo, *Hegel's Perfectionism and Freedom*, in *Perfektionismus der Autonomie*, ed. by D. Moggach, N. Mooren and M. Quante, Paderborn, Wilhelm Fink, 2019, pp. 163-182; H. Ikäheimo, *Spirit's Embeddedness in Nature: Hegel's Decentering of Self-Legislation*, «Hegel Bulletin», XLII (1), 2021, pp. 57-76.

⁵ See H.B. Schmid, F. Hindriks, H. Ikäheimo, A. Laitinen, A. Salice and D.P. Schweikard, *Editorial Note*, «Journal of Social Ontology», I (1), 2015, p. v.

It is not difficult to see that the shifting constellation is exerting pressure also on the popularity of the closely related «*ethical abstinence*»⁶ of liberal political thought, or the idea that the liberal state should remain neutral with regard to conceptions of the good or good life, and – more importantly – that so should social and political thought, as there simply are numerous reasonable views and no common measure with which the philosopher or theorist could adjudicate between them. Any attempt at adjudication – so the liberal political credo – would merely mean one particular view masquerading as universal. But if all human life has determinations that are not through and through historically or culturally variable, then surely this has implications also concerning what makes collective life, at least in important respects, better or worse, or successful or unsuccessful. In particular, the idea that life is better the more autonomous it is in the ‘abstract’ sense of free from determination by nature is clearly problematic, if it is true that determination by nature is an inescapable condition. To the extent that we – consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly – build our institutions and systems on that view of the good life, we are building it on a dangerous illusion. And to the extent that our philosophical imaginary and theorizing is premised on that view, it is contributing to the illusion, and to the danger.

Retuning to matters inner-spiritual, a related danger stems from theorizing that over-emphasizes what *differentiates* human cultures and their views of the good, or their ‘normative orders’ from each other. Today, such difference-magnifying theorizing is gladly co-opted by cynical political forces, autocrats and dictators, for rejecting any outside criticism by an appeal to an alleged incommensurability of evaluative or normative worldviews. Such theorizing unwittingly lends support to dangerous ‘us vs them’-thinking, projection of ‘clashes of civilizations’ irreconcilable by discursive means, and, at worst dehumanization of ‘them’, which opens the flood-gates for the worst atrocities humanity is capable of. Whereas this sort of slippery-slope-critique might have sounded

⁶ See R. Jaeggi, *Kritik von Lebensformen*, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2014, pp. 30-61; Eng. trans. by C. Cronin, *Critique of Forms of Life*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2018, pp. 9-31.

cheap in the more peaceful times that we are now leaving, it is likely to sound less so in the era which we are now entering. To the extent that our political discourses, institutions and systems are premised on the idea of irreconcilable evaluative or normative worldviews, they are helpless when things start going seriously wrong between nations or cultures.

Given our current global predicament, it is, I want to argue, of utmost importance to focus in theory *also* on what unites all human societies, cultures, epochs and individuals – or in short to lend respectability and philosophical articulation to the idea of *common humanity*. Part of the rehabilitated universalism vitally needed today is developing theoretical perspectives to what makes human life better or worse in any human societies and cultures, and thereby creating discursive means for conversation and mutual understanding across geographic, cultural, religious and other divides. Needless to say, ‘critique’ alone will not suffice for this purpose – and this suggests that significant resources from the academic industry of critical theory will need to be redirected from mere critique to reimagination and reconstruction.

2. *Reading Hegel today and tomorrow*

What does the above then mean for the future of Hegel-reception? The answer is simple: Kantian constructivism or subjectivism, historical and cultural relativism, and the liberal ethical abstinence will be losing in attractiveness as default assumptions under which aspects of Hegel’s work appear as interesting and interpretations or accommodations of it as respectable, plausible, or worthy of attention and debate. This holds in different ways and to different degrees both for scholarly work on Hegel, and for critical social and political thought that scans his work for resources and inspiration – the two strands of Hegel-reception which are not always easy bedfellows, but which unavoidably influence each other. What, then, is gaining ground previously occupied by the said assumptions – for sure not universally shared among the more scholarly minded students of Hegel, but certainly

widely shared by those with the more utilitarian approach? In short, a rehabilitated *realism*, a rehabilitated *universalism*, and a rehabilitation of and urgent interest in philosophical means for *evaluating* or debating better and worse forms of human life across cultural and other differences.

A clear indicator of this shift already being under way is the recent marked growth in interest in and scholarly work on two parts of Hegel's system that until recently have drawn comparably little attention: the Philosophy of Nature, and the Philosophy of Subjective Spirit. What is worth noting here is that whereas the texts that in recent decades drew the largest portion of the attention – the 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the 1821 *Philosophy of Right* (an extended version of the Philosophy of Objective Spirit) – lend themselves fairly easily to broadly historicist or relativist readings, with the former appearing to be a story of radically differing 'conceptual schemes' and the latter containing the often cited passage about philosophy being «its own time comprehended in thoughts», historicist or relativist readings face much harder time to find a foothold in the Philosophies of Nature and Subjective Spirit⁷. Also, whereas the *Phenomenology of Spirit* has inspired readings according to which its account of historically changing conceptual schemes presents a historicized transcendental philosophy of some sorts, there is no suggestion that the most fundamental structures of the empirical world, say, mechanism, space and time, chemism, or the teleology of living beings were somehow according to Hegel subject to the ebbs and flows of human history, or that they were a creation of a transcendental subject, or of human culture, projected onto something that may or may not have any structure *an sich*. Or at least not, unless one understands 'spirit' or '*Geist*' to stand for some sort of transcendental subject or subjectivity, whether ahistorical or historical – which, I shall argue, is a thoroughly misleading interpretation.

Importantly, Hegel's realism about the empirical world is intimately connected with what we might call his *realism about freedom*,

⁷ The same is of course true, even more clearly, of the Logic, which has recently similarly gained in attention. See, for example, K. Ng, *Hegel's Concept of Life. Self-Consciousness, Freedom, Logic*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2020.

and this is where we are finally entering issues of direct relevance for Hegelian or Hegel-inspired critical theory or critical social philosophy.

3. *Three principles for globalized social critical Hegelianism*

Let me next present three basic principles that, in my view, are crucial for a properly Hegelian critical social philosophy that is fit for purpose in the new crisis-ridden planetary order or disorder towards which we are now heading. I have dealt with each of the three at more length elsewhere⁸, and here my intention is merely to pull together some of the threads and paint a broader picture. The principles are:

1. multiplicity of levels of conceptual abstraction,
2. realism about freedom, and
3. the recognitive constitution of all human life as a ‘fundamental ethics’.

3.1. Multiplicity of levels of conceptual abstraction

Let us pose a question: is Hegel’s social and political philosophy bound up with a particular historical and cultural context – merely «its own time comprehended in thoughts»⁹ as Hegel’s memorable phrase puts it in the *Philosophy of Right* – or does it have some

⁸ Principle 1. in H. Ikäheimo, *Holism and Normative Essentialism in Hegel’s Social Ontology*, in *Recognition and Social Ontology*, ed. by H. Ikäheimo and A. Laitinen, Leiden, Brill, 2011, pp. 145-209; principle 2. in Gleeson and Ikäheimo, *Hegel’s Perfectionism and Freedom*, and Ikäheimo, *Spirit’s Embeddedness in Nature*; principle 3. in Id., *Recognition and the Human Life-Form: Beyond Identity and Difference*, New York, Routledge, 2022, and H. Ikäheimo, A. Laitinen, M. Quante and I. Testa, *The Social Ontology of Personhood – A Recognition-Theoretical Account* (forthcoming).

⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, ed. by K. Grotzsch and E. Weisser-Lohmann (GW, vol. 14,1), Hamburg, Meiner, 2009, p. 15; Eng. trans. by H.B. Nisbet, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 21.

claim for universal validity? The simple answer is: both and. A fact not always thematized clearly enough about Hegel's *Realphilosophie*, though obvious when one mentions it, is that it is a mixture of different levels of conceptual abstraction and thus different degrees of claimed universality. The principle is simple enough to grasp in principle, though not easy for the reader to follow in practice, and certainly not easy for Hegel himself to exercise, as exercising it consists in philosophical handiwork without clear rules to follow and with innumerable phenomena and factors to take into account.

To take an example from the Philosophy of Nature, think of a descending scale of conceptual necessity starting from the conceptual structures of the logic the deduction of which proceeds purely immanently, through structures such as spatiality or temporality that are already 'applied' logic, to the basic principles of biological life such as homeostasis, the *Umwelt*, or niche construction (not Hegel's terms, but all issues involved in Hegel's account of living beings¹⁰), all the way to concepts in operation in Hegel's descriptions of the minute details of the life-processes and structures of this or that genus of animals¹¹. What we are witnessing here is Hegel working across a scale of conceptual necessity/contingency, where at one end of the scale the philosopher can do (all) the work simply by exercising what is the proper job description of philosophers as philosophers – namely reflective thinking (*Nachdenken*)¹² – and where at the opposite end she is thoroughly dependent on empirical knowledge produced by the special sciences, organizing and sometimes arbitrating such knowledge by

¹⁰ B. Merker, *Embodied Normativity: Revitalizing Hegel's Account of the Human Organism*, «Critical Horizons», XIII (2), 2012, pp. 154-175.

¹¹ See G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1830)*, ed. by W. Bonsiepen and H.C. Lucas (GW, vol. 20), Hamburg, Meiner, 1992, § 370; Eng. trans. by M.J. Petry, *Philosophy of Nature*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1970, p. 177.

¹² Ivi, § 2; Eng. trans. and ed. by K. Brinkmann and D.O. Dahlstrom, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I: Science of Logic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 29.

means of the more abstract concepts. Whereas at one end conceptual perspectivity does not apply in principle, at the other end it does so necessarily. There is no 'absolute description' of any concrete thing, not to mention something as complex as a living being, but only descriptions that are always descriptions from some perspective, in terms not only of the abstract logical concepts or structures, but equally of empirical concepts of various levels of concreteness which develop or change as scientific theories and knowledge of the given phenomena develop or change.

How does this general principle of Hegel's *Realphilosophie* then apply in the Philosophy of Spirit, that is in Hegel's account of the human life-form? This is where we meet the question of historicism or cultural relativism versus universalism. A question Hegel-scholars have written a lot about concerns the role of the Logic in the *Philosophy of Right* – or in other words the role of the a priori, in principle a-historical, concepts of the logic in Hegel's account of the ideal state in the historical and cultural circumstances of early 19th century Prussia¹³. There is no need for critical theorists or critical social and political philosophers to delve too deep into the many scholarly details here, but only to note the general point: Hegel's social and political philosophy is a mix of conceptualities of different levels of abstractness so that whereas at the concrete end we find conceptualizations that are obviously only Hegel's own time and place «comprehended in thoughts» and hence of mainly historical interest for us today, one can easily move upwards on the scale of abstraction – or downwards on the scale of concreteness – and find principles and ideas that are less bound up with the historical and cultural constellation of Hegel's time and place and the concerns and saliences occupying his mind there.

It is also important to note that the mix ratio of historically specific concepts and considerations on the one hand and concepts that claim more in terms of universality on the other hand by no means remains constant within the Philosophy of Spirit. There is a

¹³ See the contributions to T. Brooks and S. Stein (eds.), *Hegel's Political Philosophy. On the Normative Significance of Method and System*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

significant and fairly obvious difference in this regard between its first two sections: Subjective Spirit and Objective Spirit¹⁴. The relationship between these is surprisingly poorly studied, but it is clear that in terms of their content they are internally, and dialectically, related, with Subjective Spirit discussing the human individual and Objective Spirit the human society or ‘the social and institutional world’ in contemporary philosophical parlance. The biological organism that is the embodiment of the human individual or person discussed in the Anthropology-section of Subjective Spirit, the basic structures of theoretical and practical intentionality that are the topic of its Phenomenology-section, and the basic structures of theoretical and practical cognition, the topic of the Psychology-section¹⁵, are not subject to historical change and cultural variability to the same degree as, say, forms of government are, at least if the latter are thought of in abstraction from the relatively unchanging constitution of human beings.

The proviso at the end of the last sentence is significant for a simple reason: all human societies are societies of humans, and the limits of human variability limit the historical and cultural variability of societies. The mutual or dialectical determination of objective spirit and subjective spirit is something that extreme forms of social constructivism forget, imagining objective spirit as a free-floating sphere ‘spinning without friction’ from our ontological constitution as human beings. Objective spirit, or the ‘social and institutional world’ is not abstractly free from nature, including the ‘anthropological’ determinations of the human body, nor is it abstractly free from the basic structures of specifically human intentionality and cognition.

If we are looking for principles, concepts or ideas applicable in contemporary critical social or political philosophy that aims to

¹⁴ Hegel, *Enzyklopädie*, §§ 387-482, and §§ 483-552, respectively; Eng. trans. by W. Wallace and A.V. Miller, *Philosophy of Mind*, revised and with introduction and commentary by M. Inwood, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2007, pp. 25-215, and pp. 217-256.

¹⁵ Ivi, §§ 388-412, §§ 413-439, and §§ 440-482, respectively; Eng. trans. pp. 29-141, pp. 142-164, and pp. 165-215.

speak across cultural and other differences and hence aims to address a truly global audience – contrasted both with Hegel's Prussian audience and the merely European or 'Western' audience of much contemporary Hegel-influenced critical theory – this is where we will start finding something interesting. Namely, there is a fundamental principle, often mentioned in Hegelian discourses, yet surprisingly poorly studied or elaborated on in detail – despite the fact that for Hegel it is *the* principle of the Philosophy of Spirit as a whole. More than that, it is according to the Introduction of Philosophy of Spirit the very «concept of Spirit» itself¹⁶, or in other words the evaluative essence, or immanent ontological ideal or norm of all things spiritual. This principle, evaluative essence or immanent ideal is of course *freedom*. Importantly however, it is not freedom in the sense of autonomy as collective self-legislation, as the Kantianizing Hegel-interpretations tend to have it. Rather, it is what Hegel calls «concrete freedom».

3.2. Realism about freedom

To comprehend what Hegel has in mind here, we need to abandon thinking of freedom as residing in, or establishing, a transcendental realm, whether in the strict Kantian sense, or in the historicized sense of collective self-legislation. As for the latter version, we need to bring collective self-legislation down to earth, put it in its proper context as an activity exercised by concrete living human beings, who, as living beings, are bound by evaluative or normative principles they have not legislated, that they cannot subject to legislative review or re-legislate their way out of. These constitutive principles, 'norms' or 'laws' that are our principles but not principles legislated by us¹⁷ can be ultimately boiled down to one: *concrete freedom*¹⁸. It is not any old freedom, nor freedom in the

¹⁶ Ivi, § 381; Eng. trans. pp. 9-15.

¹⁷ A theme recently emphasised also by T. Khurana, *Life and Autonomy: Forms of Self-Determination in Kant and Hegel*, in *The Freedom of Life: Hegelian Perspectives*, ed. by T. Khurana, Berlin, August, 2013, pp. 161-162.

¹⁸ See Gleeson and Ikäheimo, *Hegel's Perfectionism and Freedom*, Ikäheimo, *Spirit's Embeddedness in Nature*.

sense of self-legislation, but concrete freedom which, according to Hegel, is the ‘essence’ or ‘concept’ of spirit. What does this mean?

A key here is constitutive relationality, or the doctrine of internal relations. Any finite thing is constitutively related to ‘otherness’; hence the concept of abstract freedom is, according to Hegel, self-destructive if applied to anything to which we are constitutively related and by which we are thereby constitutively determined. One can be free, say, from particular other people, but not other people in general, because relations with other people are constitutive of being a human person. Also, one can be, in principle, free from bad institutions, but not institutions in general because they too are constitutive of our being or relations with them internal to us. Similarly, one can be free from, say, overweight or bad habits, but not the animal body and its habituation in general, because a habituated embodiment is constitutive of the kinds of beings we are. Finally, one can be free from particular natural environments, but not from external nature in general: human beings and human societies are constitutively related to and dependent on it¹⁹.

What, then, is «concrete freedom»? In short, it is reconciliation with constitutive otherness, be this other humans, social institutions, or internal and external nature; it is the «unity of unity and difference» with them or «being with oneself» in them in their otherness. As for the dimensions of internal and external nature, Hegel discusses the concretely free relation with regard to internal nature in some detail towards the end of the Anthropology-section²⁰. There the theme is the enculturation or appropriation of the body and thereby the coming about of organized embodied subjectivity – habit having a central role in this. What Hegel is talking about is the development of a concretely free relation with one’s animal body. The body both has genuine otherness to me, and at the same

¹⁹ Think not only of nature ‘out there’ in the wild, or in the fields, or in the industrial farms and so forth, but also of the air filling your lungs, the materiality of material culture, the atoms that you as well as the chair you sit on consist of, and so forth. The divide between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ nature is a complex topic.

²⁰ Hegel, *Enzyklopädie*, §§ 409-412; Eng. trans. *Philosophy of Mind*, pp. 130-141.

time its proper organization is whereby I exist as an organized «concrete subjectivity». I cannot be abstractly free from it or control it without limits (the follies of ascetism, trans-humanism, etc.), nor can I allow its otherness be unruly, hostile or reduced to mere animality. These deviations from the constitutive norm or immanent ideal of concrete freedom, «the essence of spirit», with regard to inner nature are destructive, potentially lethal to me as a concrete subject or human person. What I need in order to flourish as an embodied subject with the human form is a «unity of difference and unity» with my body – being (with) myself in it while at the same time acknowledging its otherness, doing justice to it by taking adequate care of it according to principles or norms governing it, norms that are constitutive norms for us humans, yet not legislated by us²¹.

The same basic principle – concrete freedom as the normative or evaluative essence of spirit – applies to the constitutive relationship of ‘spirit’, that is of humans, human societies and human culture to external nature: external nature both has genuine externality to or independence from us and is at the same time constitutive of us. Much of the commentary on the nature-spirit-relationship in Hegel remains highly abstract, and as such often rather uninteresting for anyone but the nerdiest of Hegel-nerds (and I confess having a nerdy streak in myself too). The main reason for this is that it is extremely difficult to catch in the shorthand format of Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia* something as infinitely complex as the relation of ‘spirit’ to ‘nature’. This would be easier if ‘spirit’ actually stood for a transcendental subject or subjectivity, or for ‘mind’, ‘the space of reasons’, or some such relatively clearly demarcated theme. But if one only glances over the list of contents of the *Philosophy of Spirit*, it should be clear that it actually stands for something much more concrete, and complex, than that. The best general term I can think of for what the *Philosophy of Spirit* as a whole is about is ‘the human life-form’. What is the relationship of

²¹ Loughlin Gleeson develops the details here in Chapter 4.2.1.2. of his Doctoral Dissertation: *Reconstructions of Hegel’s Concept of Freedom: Towards a Holistic and Universalist Reading of Concrete Freedom*, UNSW Sydney, 2020.

that to ‘nature’? The answer depends on what more precisely one wants to know. Does one have in mind – to speak still at a fairly high level of abstraction – theoretical or epistemic aspects of the relationship, or the practical aspects of the relationship? Does one mean, say, the relationship of the concepts or categories of the Logic, or of philosophical comprehension of them, to nature, or, say, the relationship of Hegel’s working slave to the field he is ploughing? Or does one mean, perhaps, the relationship of the natural sciences to nature, or the metabolic exchange of a village, or a city, or a nation, or perhaps humanity as a whole, with its natural environment? All of these are instantiations of the ‘nature-spirit’ relationship, and thus talking about that relation *in general* is a challenging enterprise, to put it mildly. Hence, whatever one makes of the few austere sentences Hegel formulated in his philosophical shorthand about this relationship²², they should always be interpreted with the richness and complexity of what ‘spirit’ (and ‘nature’) actually stands for in view.

That said, whichever particular instantiation or aspect of this particular axis of our constitutive relationality one has in mind exactly, the same immanent evaluative principle or ideal, ‘the essence of spirit’ nevertheless applies. In all of them, the immanent ideal of the constitutive relationship is concrete freedom, which is to say reconciliation with constitutive otherness whereby the otherness is not abolished, but accommodated or domesticated in a way appropriate to the specific kind of relation and good for the relata. None of this is merely of academic interest. On the contrary, I suggest that this is the general evaluative or critical framework in light of which Hegel-inspired critical social philosophy should start thinking of the ‘nature-spirit’ relation. Freedom is not something separating us from nature, something whereby we extract ourselves from it. Rather, it is – on this axis of our constitutive relationality – being connected with nature in the right way. Call this realism about freedom.

²² Hegel, *Enzyklopädie*, § 376, 381; Eng. trans. *Philosophy of Nature*, pp. 210-213; *Philosophy of Mind*, pp. 9-15.

3.3. The recognitive constitution of the human life-form as a fundamental ethics

Turning now, finally, to the ‘inner-spiritual’ axis of constitutive relationality – this brings us to the theme that has preoccupied much, both Hegelian and non-Hegelian, critical social and political thought in recent decades: that of *recognition*. Much of that work has connected the theme with issues of ethnic, cultural, sexual or other ‘identity’ – concerns which are now to an extent giving way to more universalist concerns. In light of these concerns, it is useful to focus on attitudes and relations of recognition as constitutive of human persons and of their social and institutional structures in general, or in other words of the internally intertwined subjective and objective moments of spirit, or our life-form.

As Hegel put it in one of his Jena lectures, «the human [...] is recognition»²³. To continue in philosophical shorthand by condensing numerous complex issues into one sentence only slightly longer than Hegel’s: recognition is what distinguished our life-form from ‘merely animal’ life-forms.

As I have argued elsewhere, recognition in this constitutive sense has in Hegel two dimensions: a deontological one to do with authority and norms, and an axiological one to do with immediacy-transcending concerns and value – both structures of intentionality that distinguish human persons from simpler animals²⁴. Both, furthermore, are both *ontologically* constitutive phenomena, and governed by concrete freedom as their immanent ideal, an ideal which, I want to argue, we can think of as a ‘fundamental *ethics*’ of interhuman relationships. I will focus here only on the deontological dimension of recognition.

The ontological side of this complex of issues has been in fruitful ways developed in recent American readings of Hegel²⁵.

²³ Id., *Jenaer Systementwürfe III: Naturphilosophie und Philosophie des Geistes*, ed. by R.-P. Horstmann (GW, vol. 8), Hamburg, Meiner, 1987, p. 215: «[D]er Mensch [...] ist Anerkennung».

²⁴ Ikäheimo, *Recognition and the Human Life-Form*, ch. 3.

²⁵ By Robert Brandom, Terry Pinkard and Robert Pippin.

Here the basic idea of collective autonomy, which I have above discussed only in critical tone, is indeed sound and very fruitful. The thought is that whereas simpler animals are guided by natural instincts, we ‘spiritual beings’ are governed by self-authorized and -administered norms. Institutions, we can say, are systems of norms that imply deontic powers and roles – whether these be norms of and roles in, say, linguistic communication, or the public institutions of a state. As human persons, we live in a world structured by collectively authorized and administered norms and norm-systems, and we occupy in them various positions and roles imbued with deontic powers, or in other words rights, duties, responsibilities, entitlements, and so on.

How does recognition then figure in this deontological constitution of our life-form. Here we need to distinguish between the ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ axis of recognition (an idea originally introduced by Ludwig Siep²⁶). As for the vertical axis, norms and thus institutions as systems of norms have objective social reality only insofar as they are ‘vertically, upwards’ recognized by the relevant individuals in the concrete sense of subjecting their life-activities under them. Laws can be written in books, but they have social reality and thus exist as ‘objective spirit’ only insofar as they are in this way supported by the relevant persons, or by ‘subjective spirit’ that is, which thereby becomes governed by ‘objective spirit’. The same goes for all social norms, including those governing a natural language, and thus also linguistically structured thoughts. But this ‘vertical’ axis of recognition is not the whole picture. Though norms only exist as social realities insofar as individuals lend them their authority by ‘recognizing’ them in the relevant sense, this authority also needs to have genuine otherness to the individual. Such is only the case insofar as it includes the authority of other persons²⁷. This is to say, in short, that an individual is only a norm-

²⁶ L. Siep, *Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktischen Philosophie: Untersuchungen zu Hegels Jenaer Philosophie des Geistes*, Hamburg, Meiner, 2014 (1979¹).

²⁷ This is the Hegelian solution to the Wittgensteinian conundrum of a private language or private norms. See R. Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing and Discursive Commitment*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1994, ch. 1.

governed being, and thus a person rather than a ‘mere animal’ insofar as she ‘horizontally’ recognizes some others as authorities over the relevant norms.

We have here, I want to suggest, the basic ingredients of the deontological dimension of what I call a ‘fundamental ethics’ of the life-form with regard to ‘inner-spiritual’ relations (abstracting now from relations with nature). Namely, from the above we can deduce a number of basic roles which are more fundamental than the particular deontic roles we occupy within the given norm-system:

- a) First of all, it is one thing to be only *subject* to norms, or in other words recognize others as having authority over one’s life-activities, roles and so forth; it is another thing to be also recognized by others as having *authority* over norms governing one’s life-activities, and/or those of relevant others. A subject to norms, and an authority over norms are both foundational roles in this ontological basic structure, roles which Hegel illustrates with the memorable images of the ‘bondsmen and master’. We do not even have to immediately specify which norms, or norms of which kind we are talking about to see that this – generally speaking – is a role-difference with fundamental importance. It is also not a matter of this or that culturally or historically specific ‘normative order’ in particular, but something that applies in all of them. Generally speaking, it is *better* to have at least some authority over or say on the norms whereby one’s life and the lives of those one is dependent on is governed, than it is to be mere subject to the norms²⁸.

²⁸ I take this, as well as the following point, to be as easily graspable for the modern-day inhabitants of Sydney, Frankfurt am Main, or Jyväskylä, as it was, say, for indigenous Californians before the arrival of European colonizers (see D. Graeber and D. Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything – A New History of Humanity*, London, Penguin Books, 2021, ch. 5). That it is graspable and hence could provide a starting point for reflection and debate, does of course not mean that it would by default be already accepted by everyone before such reflection and debate. A crucial obstacle to overcome in this regard is the modern western imagination of ‘pre-modern’ people lacking the capacity to reflect on and debate features of their particular form of life or those of their neighbours. Graeber and

- b) But whereas the ‘betterness’ or superiority of the role of an authority to that of a mere subject can be construed in merely prudential terms, there is another difference with a more straightforwardly moral or ethical significance²⁹. Namely, recognition of someone as having authority can be either *conditional*, conditioned by prudential considerations, such as, say, the master deliberating that it is useful for him to recognize the slave or bondsman as having authority on issues important for doing his work efficiently. Or then it can be *unconditional*, not conditioned by prudential considerations. This is what I propose to call *respect*, and it is the genuinely moral form of recognizing someone as authority. We can thus say that mutual respect between persons establishes *normative orders that are genuinely moral orders*, or, perhaps more appropriately formulated, *the moral aspect of normative orders*. Again, this we can say without immediately specifying which norms, or norms of which kind we are talking about. When it comes to norms that are very important for shared life, it is clearly better to be recognized by others as having authority over them in this unconditional, or moral sense, than it is in the merely conditional or prudential sense. This ‘betterness’ or superiority is itself not without prudential significance, but it is nevertheless superiority of a clearly moral kind.

Analogical things could be said about the axiological dimension of the ‘inner-spiritual’ constitutive relations between persons, but I will leave that here and instead finish with some brief remarks about the above. Firstly, for Hegel, recognitive relations in the above senses are specific axes of constitutive relations in which concrete freedom, the evaluative or normative ‘essence of spirit’

Wengrow’s book is highly insightful reading in this respect and generally supports the kind of anthropological universalism I am after.

²⁹ I use ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ here deliberately as interchangeable and without a fixed meaning, so as not to pretend that they are easily definable or that we know by default what we mean by them. Note that one could describe theme A also in terms of the vocabulary of ‘justice’, but that language would have hard time doing justice to theme B.

according to him, applies. In the Self-consciousness chapter of the Philosophy of Subjective Spirit³⁰, and more exactly in the sub-chapter «Universal self-consciousness»³¹, mutual recognition is whereby subjects are conscious of themselves in each other as independent others, thus realizing the unity of unity and difference. This ‘speculative’ unity is realized *fully* only by mutual unconditional recognition, since it is (a) only thereby that subjects do not reduce the authority of the respective other to their own prudential considerations, but recognize each other as genuinely other centres of authority; and (b) since it is only thereby that they are immediately moved by the authority of the other, thereby bringing about a genuine unity³².

Secondly, though autonomy as self-legislation is a fundamental distinguishing feature of our life-form, this should not be understood in the ‘abstract’ sense of something insulated or ‘spinning without friction’ from everything over which we have no legislative powers – in short from nature. In the Hegelian framework, recognitive relations cover only two of the axis of our constitutive relations, namely the ‘inner-spiritual’ ones between individuals and between individuals and norms (and thus institutions as systems of norms). Hence, they have to be thought of in the complete context including also the ‘spirit-nature’ relations. Any normative order we collectively legislate will be ‘reviewed’ by nature in terms of its sustainability or survivability. In other words, it cannot escape the principle of concrete freedom with regard to nature: only normative orders, or human societies governed by them, that *both* acknowledge the otherness of nature, its independent dynamics, *and* are able to domesticate nature to a sufficient degree – which involves a *mutual* adaptation or ‘fitting’ of society and its natural environment – are survivable and in this sense non-pathological.

Thirdly, and to return to questions immanent to Hegel’s system and how to utilize it, I have above attempted something that

³⁰ Hegel, *Enzyklopädie*, §§ 424-437; Eng. trans. *Philosophy of Mind*, pp. 152-164.

³¹ Ivi, §§ 436-437; Eng. trans. pp. 162-164.

³² See Ikäheimo, *Recognition and the Human Life-Form*, ch. 3.4.5.

in my view is necessary if we want to utilize Hegel's ideas in contemporary critical social philosophy capable of addressing the most pressing concerns of our times, and thus being, to borrow Hegel's formula, *our* time comprehended in thoughts. That is, we need to abstract from the time-bound aspects of Hegel's philosophy and focus on principles of higher levels of abstraction or universality that are equally part of it. Only so can we develop Hegelian social philosophies capable of addressing not only this or that society or culture, but humanity at large and thus providing useful conceptual means for addressing the most burning concerns of our times across cultural, religious and other divides on a planet in which concerns and saliences are increasingly shared. My suggestion has been – following Hegel's own lead in the Introduction to his *Philosophy of Spirit* – to do this by focusing on the concept of concrete freedom. But whichever principle one chooses, its application to the messy realities of social life in this or that particular society or culture requires what Hegel himself was engaged in in his *Philosophy of Right*: the painstaking handiwork of applying abstract principles to concrete social realities in particular times and places. There is no rule book for doing this, and much room for better or worse³³ judgment³⁴.

³³ Just think of Hegel's account of gender-roles in the *Philosophy of Right* (§§ 165-166), an application of abstract principles to his concrete surroundings which sympathetic readers of Hegel today find mostly embarrassing.

³⁴ I thank attendees of the *Critiques of Reason: Hegel and Contemporary Critical Theory* conference, as well as contributors to an academia.edu session on this text for their comments and questions.