

# The Changing World of Spirit in Hegel's Philosophy of Right

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## Abstract

Hegel's 'science of right' is a philosophical account of spirit's 'world'. Accordingly, in this essay, I propose to take it as the model of what I call a 'political cosmology'. In Hegel's dialectic-speculative philosophy, cosmology becomes a practical, worldly science. It becomes the account of the ways in which spirit immanently constructs, produces and comes to know its own world and itself as the actuality of the world.

## I. Hegel's dialectic and the concept of the world

Hegel's 'science of right' is a philosophical account of spirit's 'world' (*PR*: §2).<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, I propose to take it as the model of what I call a 'political cosmology'. In Hegel's dialectic-speculative philosophy, cosmology becomes a practical, worldly science. It becomes the account of the ways in which spirit immanently constructs, produces and comes to know its own world and itself as the actuality of the world. Importantly, for Hegel the totality of the world—or its cosmopolitical idea—is not an object but a process. *The world is a historical process*. Thus, the *Philosophy of Right* should be taken as offering Hegel's *Weltbegriff* of philosophy—that cosmopolitical concept that Kant formulates in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (see B866f./A838f.).<sup>2</sup>

Hegel argues that, as a *philosophical* science of right and the state (*Staatswissenschaft*), the philosophy of right is the attempt to conceptually comprehend and present the state in its full actuality. *Begreifen* and *Darstellen* are the philosophical tasks at hand, which can be jointly executed because the state is considered 'as an entity in itself rational'. Famously, the aim of the philosophy of right is neither to 'construct a state how it ought to be', i.e. an ideal state, nor to 'instruct' the state as to 'how it ought to be' (*PR*: Preface/26). The philosophical science of right should not be expected to yield 'a positive code of laws such as is required by an actual state' (*PR*: §3R/35).<sup>3</sup> If a normative 'ought' is entailed in the philosopher's work, it is contained in the question of how 'the ethical universe ought to be cognized'. Indeed, the 'ethical universe' is the touchstone

for philosophy itself: ‘*Hic Rhodus, hic saltus*’, says Hegel, concisely referring to Aesop’s fable (PR: Preface/26). Herein (*hic*)—i.e. in the world or the universe in its ethical and political dimensions—lies the test of philosophy’s capacity for rational comprehension (PR: Preface/27). Indeed, as suggested by the reference to Aesop, it is ‘here’, i.e. in the comprehension of the ‘ethical universe’ that philosophy’s relation to the actual world is tested. The world is the test and the criterion of philosophical truth. The task of philosophy is the conceptual comprehension of ‘what is’ because ‘what is actual is reason’ (PR: Preface/26). Since the world (according to a definition of traditional metaphysics) is the totality of what is, it encompasses the order of rationality. Philosophy and the world belong to the same order. This is a cosmo-logical order.

Now, the world is actual as the ‘*contemporary* world’. Accordingly, in a famous Hegelian claim, ‘philosophy is its own time apprehended in thoughts’ (PR: Preface/26). I want to emphasize the connection between philosophy and the ‘world’ over the connection between philosophy and time. The world is the totality in which philosophy is always and necessarily inscribed. There is no philosophizing without or outside of the world. Hegel’s *Weltbegriff* of philosophy is at stake here: not the concept of the world produced by philosophical speculation (what Kant called the *Schulbegriff* of philosophy) but the world in which philosophy operates as the conceptual comprehension of its contents. Philosophy is *in its own world*, and is in the present time because the present is a constitutive feature of the world. Philosophy is, more precisely, the immanent dimension of rational (self-)comprehension of that world and time. The ‘contemporary world’, then, includes its own philosophical comprehension. Reason is the common basis that joins the world and its philosophical comprehension. The world is neither a construction of reason (it is not a mere ideal lacking actuality) nor does it await instruction from reason as to what it ‘ought to be’ (PR: Preface/27). The world is the *actual* dimension of reason. To this extent, the world cannot be transcended just as the dimension of the present cannot be transcended. The world is the ultimate test of the power of rationality: it entails the intimation to actually perform, here and now, that winning ‘leap’ in Aesop’s fable. Ultimately, in requiring practice or, rather, actual performance as the only sign of truth, the world is the very proof of truth (no other promises, witnesses and additional conditions are required). ‘*Hic Rhodus, hic saltus*’. Properly, however, no ‘leaping’ beyond the world, just as no leaping beyond one’s time, is possible. Any such activity just as knowledge itself is possible only within the world and its presence. Hence, this is how Hegel completes the thought elicited by Aesop. ‘It is just as foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as that an individual can overleap its own time, or leap over Rhodes’ (PR: Preface/26).

In fact, that philosophy cannot transcend the actual world is less intuitively clear than the impossibility for the individual to overcome the time she lives

in. One could easily argue that Plato (along with most philosophers) attempted precisely that, namely, to paint a world other than and alternative to the actual. Is this not a possibility (perhaps even a *desideratum*) of philosophical thinking: imagining worlds other (and indeed ‘better’) than the actual one? The question, then, is: why should philosophy be confined to the real world; why should it be placed under its condition and constraints? This is, to be sure, an interesting but crucial limitation of what is often considered Hegel’s unabashed ‘idealism’. It is, rather, a measure of his fundamental ‘realism’.

Hegel denies philosophy the privilege of being free from the constraints of the actual world—the privilege that Plato granted to it in contrast, most notably, to technical knowledge<sup>4</sup>—on the ground, first, that philosophy exercises *reason*, not subjective opinion and feeling; and on the ground, second, that unlike mere opinion and feeling, reason is that which makes the world *actual* and *present*—actual in the strong sense of *wirklich* (in contrast, famously, to mere existence: *Enz*: §6A). If a philosophical ‘theory does indeed transcend [its] own time, if it builds itself a world as it ought to be, then it certainly has an existence, but only within [the individual’s] opinions—a pliant medium in which the imagination can construct anything it pleases’ (*PR*: Preface/26). An imagined, merely private world—the world made up by individual opinion and feeling—is properly not a ‘world’, hence is not the actual and present world; it is not the shared and public ethical world and it is not the historical world. It is not the world inhabited by philosophy. Accordingly, the retreat into alleged private, individual (non-)‘worlds’ constructed by subjective feelings and opinions sanctions philosophy’s renunciation to the actual and present world along with the renunciation to its own cognitive task. *There is only one world that is a necessarily public, collective world.*

In the *Encyclopaedia*, in presenting the Positions of Thought Toward Objectivity, Hegel confronts the concept of the world theorized by dogmatic metaphysics and by what Hegel takes to be Kant’s critical version of empiricism. The ‘positions of thought’ do not merely designate historical theories. They are ‘always-present’ fundamental attitudes of rational thinking toward objectivity. They indicate thinking in its *Weltbegriff*, as it were.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in these sections, Hegel brings to light his own *Weltbegriff* of philosophy by tackling the problem of how to dialectically and speculatively think of the ‘world’ so as to overcome the shortcomings of both dogmatic metaphysics and Kant’s criticism. In sum, Hegel’s claim herein is that the ‘world’ is not a given object of thought. The world is neither an ‘object’ nor an ‘already given’ and fully constituted object (*Enz*: §30). Rather, the world is thinking itself in its objectivity—it is, in Hegel’s expression, ‘*objektiver Gedanke*’ (*Enz*: §25). The idea of ‘objective spirit’, i.e. the topic of the *Philosophy of Right*, is the full systematic development and embodiment of this claim. Objective thinking becomes—or makes itself into—objective spirit.

Now, while thinking's objectivity, in its widest and most encompassing, but also materially less specific meaning is explored by the Logic, objective spirit is the world in its practical and poietic dimension. The world is spirit's own, self-made 'objectivity'. And conversely, objective spirit is the world in the process of its spiritual (self-)constitution.

Furthermore, Hegel argues that the world is not a *fixed* object that can serve as an anchor for thinking in its activity. Metaphysics takes the world as a fixed point in which thinking can find '*eine[n] festen Halt*' on which to hang its static predicates (*Enz*: §31). Similarly, on its part, empirical thinking finds in the immediate givenness of the world the anchor ('*den festen Halt*': *Enz*: §38) to which it owes its unshakable certainty. On Hegel's view, by contrast, far from being a fixed and concluded object the world is *one dynamically ongoing and interconnected process*. It is a dynamic process identical with thinking's own process of (self-)determination and (self-)apprehension. In its pure form, this process is staged by the *Logic*. In its concrete, specific determination in actuality, the world-process constitutes the world of nature (or *the world as nature*) and the world of spirit (or *the world as spirit*).

## II. Articulating the world of spirit—a problem of method

The *Philosophy of Right* is the closest instantiation of Hegel's *Weltbegriff* of philosophy. As such, it offers a 'political cosmology' carried out on the basis of the dialectic-speculative method presented in the *Science of Logic* as the first sphere of the philosophical system. The method is responsible for the type of political theory that Hegel advances in contrast both to the idealizations that attempt a flight from the real world, and to the historicist and positivist positions that distort actuality offering the justification of a contingent, merely historical political reality.

Spirit's world is a complex and dynamic system made of relatively independent yet interconnected processes—each moving at their own speed, each fulfilling different tasks and needs, each subject to a justification and right of its own, yet all conjoined and interdependent within the actuality of the world. The task of the dialectic-speculative method enacted within the philosophy of spirit is to bring to light the emergence of such dimensions in the world totality. Ontologically, the world is the dynamic system that articulates the differential relationship of *Wirklichkeit* and *Existenz*. Such a relationship is more often than not an oppositional and contradictory strife. Epistemologically, spirit's objective world is the layered interconnection of *Begriff* and *Gestaltung*—the dialectic-speculative concept and its figurations and representations.

Hegel argues that the claim of the rationality of actuality (and the converse claim of the actuality of the rational) is the ground of both common consciousness and the philosophical standpoint. While ‘subjective consciousness’ may regard the present with disdain and presume a superior knowledge beyond it, consciousness and philosophical reflection can claim ‘actuality’ and hence relevance only in the present world. Placed outside of the world, they are condemned to irrelevance and utter futility. In its material presence and actuality, the world entails the refutation of all stances claiming to lead outside of it. Ultimately, the world is the ‘judge’ of the views (indeed, of the ideologies) subjectively articulated within it. Truly, there is no way to avoid the judgment of the world—in one word, the *Weltgericht*, as it were.<sup>6</sup> Hegel’s position, then, is that philosophy deals with actuality *but also* with the ‘idea’ because the idea is that which is ‘actual’ in the highest sense (PR: Preface/25). Hegel’s realism is a *realism of the idea*. To be rooted in the actual world through the idea is necessary if philosophy wants to avoid the illusion of apparent truths, the absolutization of subjective standpoints, and the dismissal of the rationality that lies at the core of the actual. Now, this is the case because the present world is not ontologically homogeneous.

Herein we meet the epistemological task of the philosophy of right. ‘What matters’, Hegel argues, ‘is to recognize in the semblance of the temporal and transient the substance which is immanent and the eternal which is present’. Since the idea manifests itself by entering into ‘external existence’, actuality is not homogeneous but is a composite process. By entering existence, the rational ‘emerges in an infinite wealth of forms, appearances, and figures, and surrounds its core with a brightly colored covering in which consciousness at first resides, but which only the concept can penetrate in order to find the inner pulse [...] even within the external figures’ (PR: Preface/25). Thus, the sphere of ‘right’ is the composite process in which the rational core of actuality is enveloped by a multiform layer of appearances—*Wirklichkeit* is connected with *Existenz* and vice versa. Consciousness inhabits the outer layers of existence and either rejects them in an ideal projection beyond reality or dwells satisfied in them taking them as an ‘absolute’ not to be transcended—*das Bekannte* of the *Phenomenology*; what Gramsci calls the ‘natural absolutism of the present’.<sup>7</sup> The philosophical insight, by contrast, connects external existence with its rational core, recognizes the necessity for rationality to manifest itself as a manifold of appearances, but also, and most importantly, holds fast to the rational core of actuality without being lost in ‘the infinite material’ of existence. This discrimination is the chief problem of the method of the philosophical science of right.

While it may seem self-explanatory that philosophy as science is concerned with rationality (*Vernunft*, *Begriff*, the Idea), in the fact that rationality is actualized

by entering manifold forms of existence lies an important source of philosophical deception, a possible obstacle to the attainment of truth—hence to the understanding of the social-political world and to any practical, transformative action within it. It is indeed the trap that external existence sets to the political philosopher—the trap in which Plato and Fichte, in Hegel’s examples, have fallen: the former by making recommendations to nurses as to how to put children to sleep, the latter by getting lost in philosophically irrelevant details of passport regulations (*PR*: Preface/25). It is not in holding fast to the contingent details of historical existence and pretending to make exhaustive recommendations in this regard that philosophy shows its concern for actuality—both descriptively and normatively. On Hegel’s view, philosophy’s task is instead to bring to light the ways in which the appearances of institutions, customs and forms of life are connected to and reveal the rational core that is freedom in its complex actualization. The assessment of the degree to which material, historically determined institutions express and embody or, alternatively, do not express and embody the actuality of freedom is the condition for social, political, historical change. The task of the philosophical method is precisely to display the modalities of such interconnection between rational forms of actuality and contingent forms of existence.

Hegel claims that when the actuality of the political state is at stake, at issue can only be the ‘idea’ of the state, not the state in its contingent, historical existence (*PR*: Preface/26). While the idea is certainly bound to manifest itself in a manifold of historical appearances, such an existence does not constitute the direct topic of political philosophy. Herein, Hegel’s dialectical approach to political actuality diverges methodologically from historicist positions. It is not, however, immediately clear how philosophy should thread the balance between the recognition of the rational core of the ‘state’ (the state in its idea) and the recognition that the external forms of existence, while still valued as the appearance of the idea, should not be the ultimate reality to which philosophy appeals. On the other hand, as much as historical existence does not constitute the topic of the *Philosophy of Right*, it cannot be ignored and should not be discarded. The question, then, is the following. *How* is historical existence integrated into the consideration of the rationality of the political world?

In the opening of the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel maintains that ‘the *philosophical science of right* has the *idea of right*’ as its object. Spelling out the double track that belongs to the development of the ‘idea’, he claims that the idea of right implies both the ‘*concept of right*’ and its ‘*actualization*’. Hegel insists that the dialectic-speculative concept involves actuality in so far as ‘it gives actuality to itself’ (*PR*: §1). *Wirklichkeit* is self-produced reality. It denotes the way in which the ‘concept of right’ makes itself an integral part of the real world or affirms itself *in* the world and *as* the totality of spirit’s world. ‘Actualization’ or

*Verwirklichung* already implies (and is the embodiment of) the activity of freedom. This specification now discriminates between actuality and merely contingent historical existence. Indeed, Hegel is clear in this regard: ‘everything other than this actuality *posited through the concept itself*, is impermanent existence, external contingency, opinion, inessential appearance, un-truth, deception, etc.’ (PR: §1R; Nuzzo 2005). And yet, external appearance, to the extent that it is appearance *of the concept*, cannot be discarded. It is, instead, to be recognized and valued as the peculiar *Gestaltung* or figuration of the concept, i.e., as the way in which the concept *gives itself* a determinate material figure in existence. The objective world is the self-production of spirit *both* in its pure rationality (the *Begriff*) and in its *Gestaltung*. Although distinct from the concept’s self-determination, the process of material ‘figuration’ is essential to the movement of freedom’s actualization. Thus, Hegel explains, ‘the *figuration* that the concept gives to itself in its actualization is the other, essential moment of the idea, essential to the cognition of the *concept* and distinct from its *form* of being only as concept’ (PR: §1R). Thus, Hegel destabilizes the dualistic, un-dialectical opposition between that which is essential and necessary and that which is inessential and merely contingent; the opposition between the true and untrue; and reconfigures their interaction as the composite, multi-track process in which, by giving itself actuality, the concept enters a process of material figuration. *Verwirklichung* and *Gestaltung* go hand in hand but are not identical. They are both necessary processes; they are both self-produced by spirit in its core rationality. And yet the latter (*Gestaltung*) engages the concept in external existence under conditions that are particular, contingent, material and historical. As ‘figures’, these conditions are reclaimed by the concept precisely in their contingency, particularity and materiality. Herein, Hegel underscores the chief difference between the logical consideration of spirit’s world and its social-political apprehension. In the latter case, *Gestaltung* is unavoidable and indispensable to a *philosophical* science of right. ‘Figuration’ and the concept’s manifold ‘figures’ are distinct from the pure ‘form’ of ‘being *only* as concept’. But as self-production of the concept the figures are connected to the concept in a living and essential way that is not proper to merely contingent existence (such as, in Hegel’s example, Fichte’s passport regulations and Plato’s misplaced concern for the behaviour of nurses). Figures are historical and material, and are crystallized, epistemologically, in individual and collective ‘representations’, in language, habits and customs. Now these latter are themselves an integral part of the social and political world; they are constitutive, indeed ‘essential’ (PR: §1R) to the movement of freedom’s worldly actualization and, epistemologically, to its philosophical cognition and apprehension.

I want to underline one last point in Hegel’s account of the dialectic-speculative method of the *Philosophy of Right*. With regard to the *content* that is

manifest in the different worldly figurations of the concept, the task is to connect the core of rationality to the concrete figures crystallized in our ‘representations and language’. Hegel frames this task as an issue of ‘correspondence’ and hence truth. Given, however, that the process of the concept’s actualization and that of its figuration in representations and language—but also in specific and historically determined lifeforms, habits, customs and institutions—are relatively independent and develop at a different pace than the concept’s actualization, the philosophical insight encounters lacks of correspondence (and imperfect correspondences) as much as actual correspondences. Such a predicament fundamentally complicates the method of the philosophy of right.

### III. Conclusion

While I cannot presently dwell on this latter and crucial point, I want to offer, by way of conclusion, an indirect example of how Hegel’s method works. I want to bring such a method to bear on the reality of our contemporary world—a world that has reached an undeniable point of crisis. I want to highlight, as a negative example, some aspects of the current discussion of racism in the American context.<sup>8</sup> We see all around us pervasive and multifaceted manifestations of racism embodied and enacted in individual and social habits, behaviours and language but also rooted and differently expressed in social, political, economic institutions and laws. The latter is often referred to as ‘systemic’ racism—i.e. racism pervasive within all the interconnected aspects of the social-political ‘system’ or structure, racism entrenched at the heart of these institutions. Needless to say, racism in all its manifestations has itself a longstanding history that is deeply intertwined with the history of all those individual and collective behaviours and institutions. Now, on the one hand, all the different *factual* ways in which racism is pervasive throughout our world should be recognized; while on the other hand, its implications at the *conceptual* and *structural* level must be brought to light. This recognition is often already a first step in acknowledging the need to change the rules of the game—but it is also only a first step in a long process ahead; blindness to such recognition—be it unconscious or wilful—is a political strategy in itself.

Following Hegel’s methodological framework for a *philosophical* consideration of the social and political world, one could argue that those manifestations should be brought back to the particular *figures* assumed by racism as itself a general ‘figure’ of the ‘concept’ of un-freedom in American society. The two levels of the ‘concept’ and its ‘figurations’ must be distinguished but also both acknowledged for what they are. Herein it is relevant, first, to



ask and bring to consciousness what are, materially, the representations and figures that correspond to the concept of un-freedom in language, customs, institutions; and it is relevant, second, to stress that the phenomena connected to the figure of racism are precisely *forms of un-freedom* (and not manifestations of something else as, for example, social or economic discontent or historically grounded self-victimization) and should be addressed and combated as such.

There is an obvious sense in which racism can be detected at the superficial level of contingent appearances (in the ‘infinite wealth of forms’ that surround the core of actuality: *PR*: Preface/25) as it is articulated in language in the violence of explicitly racist slurs. In the public sphere, attention can be drawn to monuments that have overtly racist themes or address explicitly racist figures. To stop short at this (at these appearances), however, and simply advocate different speech practices (‘politically correct’ ones) or the removal of public statues claiming that racism is confined to these explicit manifestations does not address the broader reality of un-freedom that racism embodies. This latter is the conceptual point to be addressed. Additional recognition is required, then, of the many covert, implicit and indirect (and unconscious) forms in which racism is alive and active in individual and collective interactions. But, on a higher level, recognition is required of the ways in which racism is embedded in collective institutions such as the market and the workplace, the educational and health system, and, at an even higher level, is enshrined in the law and the judicial system, reaching deep into the cornerstone of American democracy that is the US Constitution and the Constitution of many States. Indeed, both the language and the institutions of racisms are at the centre of the ‘racial contract’, as Charles Mills has famously put it (1997).

In laying out the conditions for the comprehensive recognition of the manifold reality and figurations assumed by racism as expression of the concept and the reality of un-freedom in American society, philosophy may not propose directly practical solutions. It offers, however, a necessary and irreplaceable perspective that allows the reality of racism to be addressed in all its complexity as a problem that concerns the social-political *world in its entirety*—not a circumscribed part of it that may be cut off from the whole, isolated, and then possibly disregarded. In this perspective, for example, it becomes possible to understand why what white people often invoke as ‘reverse discrimination’ is an illusory notion that stands for no substantial reality—a false and disingenuous representation that does not correspond to the reality of racism deeply and systemically ingrained in the objective institutions that practice discrimination.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations:

*Enç* = Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline*. Cited by section number, following TW 8–10.

*PR* = Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Cited by section number, following TW 7. Section references are accompanied by German pagination when passages are extensive.

TW = Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bände*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> See Hinske (2013) and Nuzzo (2020).

<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, to ascertain what it takes to produce positive laws, namely, to act as actual legislators is a matter distinct from philosophical consideration (see *PR*: §3R/39).

<sup>4</sup> See, among all the argument in Plato, *Republic X*.

<sup>5</sup> See *Enç*: §27 with regard to traditional metaphysics. But I suggest that this holds true for all the positions of thought examined in these introductory sections of the *Encyclopaedia*.

<sup>6</sup> For the relation of this position to Hegel's idea of 'world-history', see Nuzzo (2024).

<sup>7</sup> See Gramsci (1975: 1727). See Nuzzo (2018: Appendix) for a discussion of this passage.

<sup>8</sup> Given the focus of my present argument I can only do so in a simplified and abbreviated way.

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