Hegel and Liberalism

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In this article, the venerable but still not entirely resolved issue of Hegel's relationship to liberalism is discussed. In contradistinction to recent communitarian accounts, the Kantian and Enlightenment idea of rational freedom in Hegel's political philosophy is shown to be the basis for Hegel's critique of traditional liberalism. While the Hegelian state incorporates most of the rights and freedoms ordinarily associated with liberalism, Hegel's rationale for these rights and freedoms is never the traditional liberal one. In conclusion, the relevance of Hegel's ideal of the rational state to our understanding of contemporary liberalism and its discontents is assessed.

Introduction

The issue of Hegel's relationship to liberalism is an old and still not entirely resolved one. What might be called the first wave in the scholarly debate over this issue began with Rudolf Haym's influential charge, in his 1857 Hegel und seine Zeit, that Hegel's political philosophy was fundamentally antiliberal and represented nothing more than a scientific apology for the reactionary Prussian state of 1821.1 This charge to a large extent stuck throughout the rest of the nineteenth century; and it was amplified in the twentieth—and adumbrated in terms of contemporary fascism and totalitarianism—by such writers as E. F. Carritt and, most famously, Karl Popper.2

Throughout the twentieth century, however, there has been a steadily growing number of scholars who have dissented from this image of Hegel as an antiliberal defender of Prussianism and as a proto-totalitarian. Their arguments have been twofold. First, drawing largely on historical and biographical evidence, they have shown that Hegel's political views were not particularly conser-

ervative in his time but, rather, of a moderately liberal or progressive character, in line with the reforms of vom Stein, Hardenberg, and Humboldt. Second, based mainly on a philosophical analysis of the Philosophy of Right, they have argued that Hegel’s political philosophy actually incorporates a number of liberal elements and is for the most part consistent with the principles of the modern constitutional state.3

The results from this first wave of controversy over Hegel’s relationship to liberalism are now largely in, and Hegel’s liberal defenders have for the most part been victorious. As Allen Wood confidently puts it: “there is now a virtual consensus among knowledgeable scholars that the earlier images of Hegel, as philosopher of the reactionary Prussian restoration and forerunner of modern totalitarianism, are simply wrong, whether they are viewed as accounts of Hegel’s attitude toward Prussian politics or as broader philosophical interpretations of his theory of the state.”4 But the resolution of this first wave of controversy has not put the issue of Hegel’s relationship to liberalism completely to rest. It has only given way to a second wave of scholarship in which Hegel’s relationship to liberalism is more subtly discussed in terms of the contemporary liberal–communitarian debate. Here Hegel is no longer viewed as an antiliberal statist or totalitarian but more positively as a thoughtful communitarian critic of liberalism.


The *locus classicus* of this communitarian interpretation of Hegel's political philosophy remains Charles Taylor's *Hegel*. There and elsewhere Taylor argues that Hegel provides a penetrating critique of some of the key assumptions, deriving from the Enlightenment, of traditional (and much contemporary) liberal doctrine—for example, its atomistic conception of the self, its negative conception of liberty, its supposed neutrality with respect to the human good, and so forth. By liberating itself from the atomistic prejudices of traditional liberal doctrine and recognizing the primacy of community or *Sittlichkeit*, Taylor argues, Hegel's political philosophy represents an important alternative to current utilitarian and Kant-inspired versions of liberalism.

There is much to recommend in Taylor's communitarian reading of Hegel. It certainly represents a vast improvement over the early interpretations of Hegel as a reactionary or totalitarian theorist. And it even represents an improvement over the conventional liberal interpretations of Hegel's political philosophy which, in trying to defend Hegel from the charge of reactionary statism or totalitarianism, tended to drain Hegel's political philosophy of its radical implications by focusing on his conventional political opinions instead of on his more original philosophical reasons. Nevertheless, Taylor's communitarian interpretation of Hegel's political philosophy ultimately fails, in my view, by understating Hegel's link to Enlightenment modernity, especially in its Kantian guise, and by exaggerating Hegel's affiliation with certain romantic themes such as organic unity, wholeness, overcoming alienation, and so forth. Taylor adopts Isaiah Berlin's term "expressivism" to refer this latter set of romantic themes in Hegel's philosophy. And while he certainly does not ignore the role of the Kantian and Enlightenment idea of rational autonomy in Hegel's outlook, he ultimately sees it as having to be supplemented by the very different, romantic idea of "expressive" unity. Hegel's political philosophy thus becomes a "synthesis" of the twin aspirations to rational autonomy and expressive unity, on Taylor's view. But such a "synthesis" looks


more like a theoretically unsatisfying compromise; and it ultimately blurs the absolutely central significance of the idea of rational autonomy in Hegel’s thought.\(^7\)

A similar difficulty afflicts Steven Smith’s more recent treatment of the issue of Hegel’s relationship to liberalism.\(^8\) Smith situates his interpretation of Hegel’s political philosophy explicitly in terms of the contemporary liberal–communitarian debate. He tells us that his interest in Hegel grew out of a dissatisfaction with current neutralist or rights–based—“deontological”—accounts of liberalism. On the other hand, he wishes to distance Hegel from some of the antiliberal and relativistic implications of contemporary communitarianism. For Smith, Hegel provides us with a “middle ground” between deontological liberalism and contemporary communitarianism. “Like the modern communitarians, he is critical of the individualistic and ahistorical conceptions of rights underlying the liberal polity, but like many liberals in both his day and ours, he is skeptical of any attempt to return to some form of democratic participatory gemeinschaft based upon immediate face–to–face relations.”\(^9\)

Again, as with Taylor, there is much to recommend in Smith’s interpretation of Hegel. In many respects it marks an improvement over Taylor’s communitarian reading of Hegel in that it more clearly brings out Hegel’s substantial affinities with the liberal tradition and distances him from some of the romantic and relativistic excesses of contemporary communitarianism—though in fairness to Taylor it should be said that he does not reduce Hegel to a simple antiliberal.\(^10\) Nevertheless, Smith’s interpretation shares with Taylor’s the defect that it makes Hegel’s political philosophy

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7. In *Patterns of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 99–107, Charles Larmore interprets Hegel in an even more communitarian direction than Taylor, albeit with a critical intention. He criticizes Taylor for allowing that the idea of rational autonomy plays any significant role in Hegel’s political philosophy and for thus underplaying “the extent to which Hegel rejected the ideal of autonomy” (168n.14).
10. Taylor has made it increasingly clear that communitarianism is not necessarily antithetical to liberal politics; “ontological issues” must not be confused
into too much of compromise between two extremes—in this case, between modern individualistic liberalism and communitarianism. The terms of the liberal-communitarian debate are largely accepted unchanged, and Hegel is simply seen as coming down somewhere in between the two alternatives, partaking of the virtues of each without suffering from the corresponding defects. What Smith fails to grasp here is the way in which Hegel’s political philosophy does not simply split the difference between contemporary liberalism and communitarianism but in many respects completely transcends the terms of the debate between them. Also, like Taylor, he does not sufficiently appreciate the centrality of the Enlightenment idea of rational autonomy to Hegel’s political philosophy, ultimately conceding too much to the romantic critique of the “divided self” and the communitarian vision of the state as a “locus of shared understandings.”

The interpretation of Hegel’s relationship to liberalism which follows in many ways picks up from Smith’s but attempts to move Hegel a little closer to, if not the liberal, at least the Enlightenment and rationalist end of the political-philosophical spectrum, away from the romantic or communitarian end. Central to this interpretation is the Enlightenment idea of rational autonomy, rational freedom, which Hegel takes over from Kant and also Fichte. It will be my contention that Hegel’s political philosophy is best seen as an extension and modification of the Kantian-Fichtean idea of rational freedom, not as an attempt to synthesize or balance this idea with an alternative romantic ideal of organic wholeness or communal solidarity.12


12. The interpretation with which mine bears the closest affinity is that of Allen Wood, Hegel’s Ethical Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). It also shares a great deal with the general view of Hegel that Robert Pippin has elaborated in a number of writings, beginning with Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); see especially his suggestive remarks on Hegel’s relation to the Kantian and Enlightenment idea of autonomy in Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 8–15, 46–79.
What does this mean for Hegel's relationship to liberalism? It does not mean that Hegel is in any way a liberal in the classic or early modern sense. Indeed, as we shall see in the ensuing section, Hegel's political philosophy constitutes a fairly radical critique of the theoretical—largely individualistic—foundations of traditional liberalism. It is true, as almost all of Hegel's liberal defenders have pointed out, that the Hegelian state incorporates a good many of the rights and freedoms we ordinarily associate with liberalism. But the crucial point is that Hegel's rationale for these freedoms is never the traditional liberal one. Allen Wood captures the relationship between Hegel's largely liberal politics and his nonliberal philosophical justification of them nicely when he says that, while "Hegel's political ideas leave the liberals' state pretty much intact," his ethical theory "shreds the liberal rationale for it."  

After examining Hegel's critique of the theoretical foundations of traditional liberalism, I move on in the next section to consider the exact relationship between the Hegelian state and the freedoms and individuality we ordinarily associate with liberalism. Finally, in my conclusion, I take up the more speculative question of the relevance of Hegel's political philosophy to our thinking about liberalism today. Formulated in terms of the general theme of a recent American Political Science Association meeting, of what use is Hegel's political philosophy to the understanding and/or defense of liberalism now "at century's end?"

**Hegel's Critique of Liberal Individualism**

Before we begin to examine Hegel's critique of liberalism, we need to have some idea of what is generally meant by liberalism. Here I mean to be brief and uncomplex. I will simply assert that liberalism, at least traditionally understood, is a political doctrine concerned primarily with securing the life, liberty, and property

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of the individual—to take Locke’s sacred threesome. The sovereign individual lies at the base of traditional liberal doctrine, and this fact is reflected in liberalism’s chief theoretical construct, namely, the social contract. In the social contract, isolated individuals come together and, based on their self-interest, choose to enter civil society in order to secure the life, liberty, and property which they possess only insecurely in the state of nature.

Hegel’s critique of liberalism focuses on the individualism upon which it rests. In his critique, this liberal individualism presents two different aspects, not always clearly distinguished by Hegel himself. The first aspect has to do with the individualistic end or purpose which liberalism attributes to the state, namely, the securing of the life, liberty, and property of the individual. This, of course, is the core of the classical liberalism espoused by such early modern thinkers as Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, and the American Founders. But Hegel’s critique of liberalism frequently focuses on another aspect of individualism, this one having to do not with the individualistic end or purpose which liberalism attributes to the state but with the individualistic or consensual basis upon which liberalism insists the state and government must rest. This aspect of liberal individualism Hegel associates primarily with the revolution in political philosophy wrought by Rousseau and with the very practical revolution in France which it spawned. In some ways, the individualism Hegel refers to here has more to do with democracy than with liberalism per se. It is interesting to note, however, that, in the one place he actually uses the word “liberalism,” it is in connection with this second, Rousseauan aspect of individualism.14

We may now turn to Hegel’s specific criticisms of each of these two aspects of liberal individualism, beginning with the first, which envisages the state’s end as securing the life, liberty, and property of individuals. In the Philosophy of Right, Hegel identifies this classical liberal understanding of the state with the standpoint of civil society; it is the state as the understanding conceives it, “the external state, the state of necessity” (PR, par. 183).15

15. References to Hegel’s Philosophy of Right (PR) appear in the text in parentheses. For the most part I have relied on H. B. Nisbet’s English translation,
And his reasons for rejecting it are most clearly expressed in that part of the *Philosophy of Right* where Hegel tries to differentiate his own understanding of the state from that belonging to civil society. He writes, in the important Remark to Paragraph 258:

> If the state is confused with civil society and its determination is equated with the security and protection of property and personal freedom, *the interest of individuals as such* becomes the ultimate end for which they are united; it also follows from this that membership of the state is an optional matter. But the relationship of the state to the individual is of quite a different kind. Since the state is objective spirit, it is only through being a member of the state that the individual himself has objectivity, truth, and ethical life. *Union* as such is itself the true content and end, and the destiny of individuals is to lead a universal life (*PR*, par. 258R).

This passage encapsulates almost the whole of Hegel's critique of the classical liberal conception of the state. According to this liberal conception, the individual qua individual is of supreme value. The state serves merely as a means by which the individual can more safely and securely pursue his or her own particular ends or purposes. But Hegel rejects this understanding of the relationship of the state to the individual. The state is not simply a means to the satisfaction of the individual in his or her own particularity. Rather, the state is the objective embodiment of that universality which represents the destiny and deepest essence of human beings. For this reason, it is a mistake to view the state as being based on a contract. A contract is something grounded in the arbitrary wills of individuals and at their option. But for Hegel membership in the state cannot be an optional matter. Again, the state represents the objectification of the universal and rational essence of human beings. Therefore, there is an obligation to belong to it. As Hegel puts it in another place: "It is the rational destiny of human beings to live within the state, and even if no state is yet present, reason requires that one be established" (*PR*, par. 75A). Against the liberal contractual model of the state, Hegel here returns to the Aristotelian understanding of man as by nature a political animal.

Hegel’s difference with classical liberalism here ultimately relates back to his very different understanding of human freedom. For both Hegel and classical liberalism, the state exists to promote human freedom, but what each understands by freedom is very different. For Hegel, the freedom that the liberal state seeks to protect and enlarge is merely the freedom of the “arbitrary will” (Willkür), the freedom to do as one pleases. But this is not genuine freedom, according to Hegel. For the content of the arbitrary will consists merely in our natural drives and inclinations, and this content stands in direct contradiction with the universal form of the will. The truly free will—what Hegel calls the “rational will”—must will the universal, freedom, itself. This it does by willing law and the state. Law and the state in no way constitute a limitation of our freedom, unless we understand freedom wrongly as arbitrary caprice and the satisfaction of our particularity. Rather, law and the state represent the highest fulfillment of our freedom understood as rational freedom.¹⁶

Hegel’s idea of rational freedom is obviously related to the Kantian idea of rational autonomy. Though Hegel heaps criticism on the formalism of the Kantian moral will, this should not blind us to the significant affinities his idea of freedom as rational self-determination has with Kant’s. What Hegel ultimately criticizes Kant for is not his idea of freedom as rational autonomy but, rather, his failure to ground this idea of freedom in a less oppositional relationship to sensuous nature, the world, and otherness in general. Related to this, Hegel also criticizes Kant for failing to incorporate his idea of rational autonomy more fully into his political philosophy. The revolutionary idea of freedom upon which his moral philosophy is based Kant abandons in his political philosophy, which rests instead on a more empiricist and conventionally liberal notion of freedom. Hegel quotes Kant’s definition of right (Recht) in the Rechtslehre to the effect that right consists in “the limitation of my freedom or arbitrary will in such a way that it may coexist with the arbitrary will of everyone else in accordance with a universal law.” And he comments that such a definition of right is ultimately

based, not on the will understood as the rational will, but on the will understood "as the particular individual, the will of the single person in his distinctive arbitrariness" (PR, par. 29R).17

It would perhaps be cavalier, even in such a brief overview of Hegel's idea of rational freedom, not to take some notice of Isaiah Berlin's famous criticisms of the idea, coming as they do from a classical liberal point of view. Hegel's idea of rational freedom is, of course, a version of what Berlin defines as the "positive" concept of freedom. Berlin is certainly right to distinguish this positive notion of freedom as rational self-direction from the conventionally liberal, "negative" notion of freedom, which he defines as the ability to pursue our wants and desires without obstruction or intrusion. Where his argument goes wrong is when he claims that the positive notion of freedom necessarily leads to authoritarianism or totalitarianism when applied to the realm of politics. In order to sustain this claim, Berlin finds it necessary to attribute to adherents of positive freedom the assumption that in morals and politics "there must exist one and only one true solution to any problem."18 Of course, once this assumption is admitted, it is not difficult to derive the features of a full-blown totalitarian rationalism, replete with the "rule of experts" and an "elite of Platonic guardians."19 The problem is, the assumption has nothing to do with Hegel. Nowhere in his thought do we find such a rigid and simple-minded rationalism. Indeed, as we shall soon see, the Hegelian state accommodates a considerable amount of diversity in the form of what he calls the "right to the satisfaction of the subject's particularity" (PR, par. 124R). Hegel's idea of freedom is not the conventional or classical liberal one. But this does not mean that it is therefore totalitarian. There is, perhaps, something in between.

Hegel's antipathy to the classical liberal understanding of the state as a mechanism for securing the life, liberty, and property of individuals is one of the most constant elements in his political philosophy, going all the way back to his earliest writings on

17. PR, par. 29R. For Kant's exact formulation of his definition of right, see *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 133.
politics. In the early essay, "The Positivity of the Christian Religion" (1795–96), for example, Hegel laments the loss of republican freedom amongst the Greeks and Romans and the replacement of civic virtue and the "freedom to obey self–given laws" by individualism and the "right to the security of property." And in a parallel passage from the "Berne Fragments" (1793–94), he writes, apparently with reference to the recent Kantian revolution in morality, that humanity has begun to emerge from its "centuries–long preoccupation with the individual in his particularity." "Now that moral ideas can play a role in the lives of human beings," the "comforts and adornments" of private existence have begun to "sink in value"; and "constitutions that merely guarantee life and property are no longer regarded as best." Already here one can see the connection between Hegel's appropriation of the Kantian idea of moral freedom and his critique of the nightwatchman state of classical liberalism.

In his pre–Phenomenology Jena writings as well—Natural Law (1802–1803), System of Ethical Life (1802–1803), and the philosophies of spirit of 1803–1804 and 1805–1806—Hegel exhibits a consistent hostility to the idea that the state is there merely to protect the life and property of individuals. Throughout these writings, he subordinates the particularistic claims of economic life to the genuine freedom and universality of "absolute ethical life" (absolute Sittlichkeit). Sometimes he identifies each of these aspects of social life with a specific social class. Corresponding to absolute ethical life and serving as custodians of the political whole is the class of the free, a military class distinguished by the virtue of courage and a willingness to risk violent death for the sake of the whole. Corresponding to economic life, what Hegel sometimes refers to as "relative ethical life," is the class of the unfree, the bourgeoisie, which "exists in the difference of need and work, and

in the law of justice of possession and property; its work concerns
the individual and thus does not include the danger of death."23
As this distinction between the free, political class and the unfree,
ecconomic class suggests, Hegel does not identify the freedom of
absolute ethical life with the security of individual life and prop-
erty but precisely with the willingness to sacrifice these for the
sake of the political whole or the universal. This is what Hegel
describes throughout these Jena writings—as well as later on
in the Philosophy of Right—as the ethical significance of war: in
war all personal security and property "vanish in the power of
the universal."24
It is in this context, too, that Hegel's various accounts of the
struggle for recognition in these pre—Phenomenology Jena writings
should be seen.25 The struggle for recognition plays a more directly
political role in these early accounts than in the later, more famous
account found in the Phenomenology. With it Hegel is concerned to
explain—philosophically, not historically—the transition from
prepolitical life to ethical or political life proper in the state. The
struggle for recognition thus plays a role similar to that played by
the state of nature in earlier social contract theory, but Hegel draws
from it very different consequences. For what is at issue here is
not self—preservation or security of property but precisely recog-

Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Science of Law, trans. T. M.
Werke, 2: 480–84, 489.
of Spirit of 1805–6, trans. Leo Rauch (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983),
171; Gesammelte Werke, ed. Rheinische—Westfaelische Akademie der Wissenschaften
(Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1968–), 8: 276. See also Natural Law, p. 93 (Werke, 2: 481–
82); PR, par. 324R. It should perhaps be pointed out here that, though Hegel
continues to speak of the "ethical moment of war" in PR, the idea of individuals
making heroic sacrifices on behalf of the state plays a much smaller role in this
work than it does in his earlier writings. See in particular what he says about the
generally nonheroic and everyday character of patriotism (PR, par. 268R).
25. See G. W. F. Hegel, System of Ethical Life, trans. H. S. Harris and T. M.
[Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1967], pp. 46–52); First Philosophy of Spirit, trans. H. S.
Harris (Albany: SUNY Press, 1979), pp. 236–41 (Gesammelte Werke, 6: 307–14);
nition—recognition of the individual as a spiritual being and an absolutely free personality. And it is only by risking life and property, by engaging in a "life and death struggle," that such recognition can be achieved. For Hegel, the transition from the state of nature to ethical or political life involves something far more grandiose—namely, absolute freedom—than anything found in Hobbes or Locke. Once again we are made aware of why he cannot accept protection of life, property, or even of particularistic personal liberty as the ultimate end or purpose of the state.

So much, then, for Hegel's critique of the first aspect of liberal individualism we identified above. We may now turn to the second aspect we distinguished, that having to do with the individualistic or consensual basis upon which liberalism insists the state and government must rest. The issue here is no longer civil or economic liberty but political liberty. The demand is that the state or government should correspond to the will of the individual. The thinker with whom Hegel preeminently associates this democratic demand for political liberty is Rousseau. And his critique of this democratic aspect of individualism for the most part coincides with his critique of the Rousseauan notion of the general will.

To develop Hegel's critique here, let us return once again to the important Remark to Paragraph 258 of the Philosophy of Right. Having rejected protection of life, property, and personal liberty as the ultimate end of the state, Hegel turns his attention to Rousseau's conception of the state. And it is at once clear that he finds this conception to be deeper and more spiritual than the instrumental conception of the state of classical liberalism. "It was the achievement of Rousseau," he writes, "to put forward the will as the principle of the state, a principle which has thought not only as its form... but also as its content" (PR, par. 258R). Whereas earlier social-contract theorists such as Hobbes and Locke made self-preservation or property-protection the principle of the state, Rousseau made free will itself the principle of the state. It is only with Rousseau, Hegel maintains in his Lectures on the History of Philosophy, that freedom was recognized as "the distinguishing feature of man." He quotes the Social Contract to the effect that "to renounce one's freedom is to renounce that one is a man," and he goes on to conclude that, with Rousseau, there came "into con-
sciousness as content the sense that man has liberty in his spirit as the altogether absolute, that free will is the notion of man." 26

Despite Rousseau's great achievement in making will the basis of the state, Hegel goes on to argue that he completely undermined this achievement by understanding the will in the wrong way, taking it as the individual will instead of as the rational will. "Rousseau considered the will only in the determinate form of the individual will (as Fichte subsequently also did) and regarded the universal will not as the will's rationality in and for itself, but only as the common element arising out of this individual will as a conscious will" (PR, par. 258R). It might be objected that Hegel's interpretation of Rousseau's notion of the general will here is one-sidedly individualistic. After all, Rousseau does take some trouble to distinguish the general will from what he calls the "will of all." Nevertheless, Rousseau's doctrine of the general will is notoriously ambiguous, and Hegel's interpretation of it does capture certain individualistic elements which creep into it: for example, Rousseau's contention that, in joining civil society and submitting to the general will, each "nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before"; his insistence that the general will cannot be represented and demands some sort of directly democratic arrangement; and so forth. 27

At any rate, Hegel sees the individualism implicit in Rousseau's democratic doctrine of the general will as having disastrous consequences for our understanding of the state, consequences which were realized in the destructive events of the French Revolution. When the universal will is misunderstood as merely the common element arising out of everybody's individual will, he writes,

the union of individuals within the state thus becomes a contract, which is accordingly based on their arbitrary will and opinions, and on their express consent given at their own discretion; and the further consequences which follow from this, and which relate merely to the understanding, destroy the divine [element] which has being in and for

27. See the Social Contract, I, 6; III, 12-15.
itself and its absolute authority and majesty. Consequently, when these abstractions were invested with power, they afforded the tremendous spectacle, for the first time we know of in human history, of the overthrow of all existing and given conditions within an actual major state and the revision of its constitution from first principles and purely in terms of thought. 28

The connection Hegel draws here between Rousseau’s doctrine of the general will and the terrible events of the French Revolution runs through his writings and goes all the way back to his famous discussion of the French Revolution in the Phenomenology. In that work, the French Revolution is seen as the product of what Hegel calls “absolute freedom,” which he interprets in terms of the Rousseauan notion of the general will. As he did in the passage from the Philosophy of Right above, Hegel interprets Rousseau’s notion of the general will quite individualistically. The general will, he writes, “is not the empty thought of will which consists in silent assent, or assent by a representative, but a real general will, the will of all individuals as such.” According to this doctrine of the general will, “each, undivided from the whole, always does everything, and what appears as done by the whole is the direct and conscious deed of each.” But no actual state can embody such a general will. No state can fulfill the demand that every act of government be the “direct and conscious deed of each,” that every act of government should emanate from the self-conscious decision of every individual. Every state—and especially the rational state—involves a certain amount of social differentiation and political representation. The basic flaw of the absolutely free individual consciousness when it comes to the state is that “it lets nothing break loose to become a free object standing over against it. It follows from this that it cannot achieve anything positive, either universal works of language or of reality, either of laws and general institutions of conscious freedom, or of deeds and works of a freedom that wills them.” Unable to produce a positive work or deed, the only thing left for the individual consciousness characterized by absolute freedom is “negative action” and the “fury of destruction.” 29

28. _PR_, par. 258R.
Hegel’s discussion of the French Revolution in the *Phenomenology* makes clear why he rejects the democratic individualism which he identifies with Rousseau’s doctrine of the general will. There is one more passage, however, coming from the *Philosophy of History*, which I would like to draw attention to. This passage not only very clearly encapsulates the sort of democratic individualism to which Hegel opposes himself, it also connects this democratic individualism to what Hegel understands by “liberalism.” In this passage, Hegel is concerned not with the French Revolution per se but with its legacy in the post-Napoleonic state. In this state, we still encounter the demand that

the ideal general will should also be *empirically* general—i.e. that the units of the state, in their individual capacity, should rule, or at any rate take part in government. Not satisfied with the establishment of rational rights, with freedom of person and property, with the existence of a political organization in which are to be found various circles of civil life each having its own functions to perform, and with that influence over the people which is exercised by the intelligent members of the community, and the confidence that is felt in them, *Liberalism* sets up in opposition to all this the atomistic principle, that which insists upon the sway of individual wills; maintaining that all government should emanate from their express power, and have their express sanction.  

As he did in previous discussions of the French Revolution, Hegel proceeds to show how the “liberal” and atomistic principle which insists that all government action should emanate from the express consent of individuals prevents any stable political organization from being established and leads only to perpetual “agitation and unrest.” He also says that the political problem posed by this liberal individualism is the one “with which history is now occupied, and whose solution it has to work out in the future.”  

Hegel’s critique of what we have been calling the second aspect of liberal individualism—that aspect having to do with consensual basis of the state and government—began from his critique of Rousseau’s misinterpretation of the universal will in terms of the individual will. In opposition to Rousseau, Hegel

interprets the universal will in terms of the rational will. Unlike the individual will, the rational will does not derive its content from something other than itself, namely, from our inclinations and desires. Rather, the rational will derives its content from the concept of will, freedom, itself. The rational will is simply the will that wills freedom and hence itself. While for the individual will it is the mere fact that the individual chooses that is important, for the rational will it is what is chosen that is decisive. It is the rationality of the content of the rational will, whether that content is chosen by individuals or not, that Hegel emphasizes in his critique of Rousseau’s notion of the general will in the Remark to Paragraph 258 of the Philosophy of Right:

In opposition to the principle of the individual will, we should remember the fundamental concept according to which the objective will is rational in itself, i.e. in its concept, whether or not it is recognized by individuals and willed by them at their discretion—and that its opposite, knowledge and volition, the subjectivity of freedom (which is the sole content of the principle of the individual will) embodies only one (consequently one-sided) moment of the Idea of the rational will, which is rational solely because it has being both in itself and for itself (PR, par. 258R).

Hegel’s subordination of the subjective, “for itself” character of the individual will to the objective, “in itself” rationality of the genuinely free will in this passage clearly encapsulates his departure from the conventional liberal understanding of freedom and from the liberal idea of the state which is ultimately based on it. Nevertheless, though “the subjectivity of freedom” is clearly subordinated to the objectivity of the rational will in this passage, it is not altogether ignored. Hegel does say that this subjectivity of freedom constitutes one moment of the Idea of the rational will. We must now consider more carefully the exact place of this subjective aspect of freedom—the aspect beloved by liberalism—in Hegel’s overall conception of the rational state.

The Role of Subjective Freedom

As we have seen, Hegel criticizes liberalism for its understanding of the state as a mere means to the protection and enhancement of the personal or particular freedom of individuals. For him, the state is not a means at all but, rather, an end in itself. It is the
realization of the rational freedom of human beings, the actualization of their ownmost essence. The state, he writes in the Introduction to the Philosophy of History, "is the reality wherein the individual has and enjoys his freedom—but only insofar as he knows, believes, and wills the universal." Freedom does not consist in the arbitrary caprice of the individual. Rather, "it is law, ethical life, the state, and they alone, which comprise the positive reality and satisfaction of freedom. The freedom which is limited in the state is that of caprice, the freedom that relates to the particularity of individual needs."

It is in connection with this understanding of the state as the realization of the rational freedom of human beings that some of Hegel’s most extravagant claims on behalf of the state and some of his most anti-individualistic remarks appear. For example, again in the Introduction to the Philosophy of History, he writes that "all the value that human beings possess, all of their spiritual reality, they have through the state alone. Their spiritual reality consists in the fact that their essence—rationality—is objectively there for them as knowers." And in the Philosophy of Right, he describes the relationship of individuals to ethical life as that of accidents to substance: "Whether the individual exists or not is a matter of indifference to objective ethical life, which alone has permanence and is the power by which the lives of individuals are governed" (PR, par. 145A). Statements such as these, as I have tried to indicate above, can be given a nonsinister—if not exactly liberal—meaning when understood in the context of Hegel’s total doctrine of rational freedom or rational will. Nevertheless, this has not prevented Hegel’s critics from reading into these statements a totalitarian intention.

Even if not totalitarian, Hegel’s “rationalistic” outlook described above is fairly far removed from the individualistic outlook of conventional liberalism. But there is another aspect of Hegel’s political teaching which gives far-reaching recognition to the individuality and subjective freedom he disparages elsewhere. Hegel uses a variety of phrases to refer to this aspect of his political teaching—"the right of the subject to find satisfaction in the action," "the right of the subject’s particularity to find satisfaction,” “the

32. Introduction to The Philosophy of History, p. 41; Werke, 12: 55-56.
33. Introduction to The Philosophy of History, pp. 41-42; Werke, 12: 56.
freedom of particularity,” and, most simply, “subjective freedom” (PR, pars. 121, 124R, 185R, 260A). And he claims in a number of places that it is the recognition of this principle of subjective freedom which distinguishes the modern state from the states of classical antiquity and renders it superior to them (PR, pars. 124R, 185R, 260A). It is, of course, this more individualistic aspect of Hegel’s political teaching that liberal interpreters have latched onto in defending Hegel against the charges of statism or totalitarianism. And while they are largely right to do so, we would do well to go beyond this apologetic impulse and consider more carefully the exact place of subjective freedom in Hegel’s political philosophy as a whole.

Let us begin with Hegel’s discovery of the importance of individuality and subjective freedom in his political philosophy. For, unlike his doctrine of rational freedom and its realization in the state, Hegel’s appreciation for modern individuality and subjectivity was not present in his philosophy from the start. In his earliest writings on religious-political themes, for example, the ideal of the classical polis is still firmly embedded in Hegel’s imagination, and there is little recognition of—or at least reflection on—the inappropriateness of this ideal to modern conditions. This begins to change in The German Constitution (1799–1802), where Hegel makes a number of interesting distinctions between ancient and modern political conditions. But Hegel’s achievement in this regard remains somewhat uncertain through much of the Jena period. As Jean Hyppolite remarks, there is something “oddly archaic” about such works as the Natural Law essay and the System of Ethical Life: “The polis and Platonic ideal mingle freely with eighteenth-century states in a completely unhistorical exposition.” It is only in the Philosophy of Spirit of Spirit of 1805–1806 that Hegel finally and fully appreciates the difference between the “deeper spirit” of modern individuality and the naive unity of individual and collective in the Greek polis. This individuality, he writes, represents

the higher principle of the modern era, a principle unknown to Plato and the ancients. In ancient times, the common morality consisted of the beautiful public life—beauty [as the] immediate unity of the universal and the individual, [the polis as] a work of art wherein no part separates itself from the whole, but is rather the genial unity of the self-knowing Self and its [outer] presentation. Yet individuality’s knowledge of itself as absolute—this absolute being—within—itself—was not there. The Platonic Republic is, like Sparta, [characterized by] this disappearance of self-knowing individuality.36

Hegel’s abandonment of his early Hellenic ideal and his growing appreciation of modern subjectivity and individuality is thoroughly reflected in the argument of the Phenomenology of 1807. The overall intention of this work is to grasp the true “not only as substance but also as subject.” And in keeping with this intention, Hegel traces the historical path of spirit from the immediate substantiality of the Greek polis to the complete mediation of this substantiality by subjectivity in the modern world. Though this historical process involves the utmost pain, fragmentation, and self-alienation, Hegel ultimately sees it as necessary for a fully self-conscious relationship to the universal and the absolute. Contrary to what some commentators have argued, the Phenomenology cannot be seen simply as a “massive assault upon the ‘subjectivity’ of individualism” or as an “elegy for Hellas.”37 James Schmidt has it much more right when he remarks that the Phenomenology “is not so much an elegy for Hellas as an exorcism of Hegel’s own obsession with Athens.”38

This brings us back to the Philosophy of Right. Individuality and subjective or particular freedom are built into the very

36. Philosophy of Spirit of 1805–6, p. 160; Gesammelte Werke, 8: 263.
structure of that work. In the section devoted to "abstract right," Hegel vindicates the right of the "person" to own property. And in the section devoted to "morality," he vindicates the right of the "subject" to find satisfaction—the satisfaction of his particularity—in his actions. It is in "civil society," however, that subjective freedom and particularity receive their supreme recognition in Hegel's argument. There, in the endless satisfaction of economic needs and wants, we find particularity "indulging itself in all directions as it satisfies its needs, contingent arbitrariness, and subjective caprice" (PR, par. 185). It is true, as we have already seen, that Hegel ultimately sees civil society as having to be surpassed (aufgehoben) by the state; and that he argues against the confusion whereby the state is seen to exist for civil society instead of the other way around. Nevertheless, for Hegel, aufgehoben means not only to cancel but to preserve. And it is clear from the argument of the Philosophy of Right that the subjective freedom and particularity of civil society are to be preserved in the state, even if they are not to be treated as absolute or regarded as the ultimate ends for which the state exists.

Why is it so important that subjective freedom be preserved within the state? Hegel's answer to this question has a couple of angles to it. In the first place, as we have already seen, the right of subjective freedom represents the "higher principle" of modernity versus the purely substantial principle of antiquity. Largely the endowment of Christianity, subjective freedom is something modern people have not only learned to manage and come to enjoy but also to expect and demand to be satisfied. Such a demand the modern state cannot ignore.

In addition to this, though, Hegel also sees a tremendous practical advantage accruing to the state from its incorporation of subjectivity and particularity. If the state can somehow link its universal interest to the particular interest of the individual, it will be internally strong and stable. If, on the other hand, the individual does not find the satisfaction of his particularity in the state, the state will be weak; its universality will remain abstract, without actuality.

What matters most is that the law of reason should merge with the law of particular freedom, and that my particular end should become identical with the universal; otherwise, the state must hang in the air. It is the
self-awareness of individuals which constitutes the actuality of the state, and its stability consists in the identity of the two aspects in question (PR, par. 265A).

The modern state is strong and stable, according to Hegel, precisely because it allows for the satisfaction of subjective freedom and shows itself to be "the sole precondition of the attainment of particular ends and welfare" (PR, par. 261A). "The principle of modern states has enormous strength and depth because it allows the principle of subjectivity to attain fulfillment in the self-sufficient extreme of personal particularity, while at the same time bringing it back to substantial unity and so preserving this unity in the principle of subjectivity itself" (PR, par. 260).

Hegel's point here about the need for the individual to find his particular interests—his person, his property, his particular welfare—protected and secured in the state in order for the latter to be strong and stable may seem to blur the point we saw him make repeatedly above about the state's not being a mere means to the protection of the life, liberty, and property of the individual. Indeed, he says at one point that it has often been said that the end of the state is the happiness of its citizens. This is certainly true, for if their welfare is deficient, if their subjective ends are not satisfied, and if they do not find that the state as such is the means to this satisfaction, the state itself stands on an insecure footing (PR, par. 265).

We must be careful not to misconstrue what Hegel says here, however. He does not say that the ultimate end of the state is to promote the subjective freedom or particular interests of individuals. He only says that individuals must find their subjective ends satisfied in the state and that they must see the state as somehow instrumental to this satisfaction; otherwise the state will stand "on an insecure footing." Again, his point is a practical one. It is not about the ultimate end of the state but about what is necessary to make that end—the universal, rational freedom—actual and concrete.

Hegel places a great deal of importance on the unity of particular and universal, subjective will and rational will, in the state. He says in one place: "Everything depends on the unity of the universal and the particular within the state" (PR, par. 262A). And in another, he states that it is "a proposition of the highest intrinsic
importance” that “a state is well-constituted and strong if the private interest of citizens is united with the universal goal of the state, so that each finds its fulfillment and realization in the other.”39 Much of what Hegel has to say about the “internal constitution” of the state is designed to address this problem of uniting the particular interest of the individual with the universal end of the state. His concern is that the substantiality of the state not appear as something alien or other to the subject but, rather, as something in which the particularity of the subject is fulfilled. In this way, a patriotic disposition is inculcated in citizens: “the consciousness that my substantial and particular interest is preserved and contained in the interest and end of an other (in this case, the state),” so that “this other immediately ceases to be an other for me” (PR, par. 268).

Hegel’s concern with linking the individual to the state and preventing the latter from appearing as an alien force is evinced particularly clearly in his distaste for administrative centralization. This distaste appears quite early in Hegel’s reflections on politics. In The German Constitution, for example, he criticizes what he calls the “machine state” (which he associates with Fichte, on the one hand, and with Jacobin France and Frederician Prussia, on the other) in which everything in society is regulated from the top down by the supreme public authority. Anticipating Tocqueville, he decries the effects such administrative centralization has on the public spirit and civic virtue of citizens: “How dull and spiritless a life is engendered in a modern state where everything is regulated from the top downwards, where nothing with any general implications is left to the management and execution of interested parties of the people.”40

In the Philosophy of Right, he reiterates this criticism of administrative centralization, which he now associates primarily with France. In France, not only is everything controlled from above, but there is a lack of “corporations and communal associations”—here again one thinks of Tocqueville—“that is, circles in which particular and universal interests come together.”

39. Introduction to The Philosophy of History, p. 27; Werke, 12: 39.
For Hegel, such corporations and communal associations play a crucial role in preventing individuals from degenerating into a "collection of scattered atoms" and also in preventing the state from becoming something alien and remote from the particular interests of individuals (PR, par. 290A). A similar concern with uniting particular interests with the universal interest, the subjective will with the rational will, informs Hegel’s reflections on political representation and the role of the people in legislation. The modern principle of subjective freedom demands that the personal will and insight of individuals receive some sort of recognition in the process of universal legislation. This is the role of parliamentary institutions, according to Hegel. “The role of the Estates [in the political sense] is to bring the universal interest into existence not only in itself but also for itself, i.e. to bring into existence the moment of subjective formal freedom” (PR, par. 301). Put more simply: “The proper significance of the Estates is that it is through them that the state enters into the subjective consciousness of the people, and that the people begins to participate in the state” (PR, par. 301A).

Hegel, then, is concerned that the personal will and insight of individuals be reflected in the legislative process at some level. But he is equally, if not more, concerned that this legitimate demand on the part of subjectivity not escalate into the radical demand that government or legislation correspond directly to or emanate directly from the subjective wills of individuals. This is precisely the sort of democratic individualism we saw Hegel reject in his critique of liberalism. In order to combat such democratic individualism, he proposes that the corporations based on the estates in civil society serve as the basis for political representation. By being represented through their corporations, individuals cease to present themselves as a mere “aggregate” or “unorganized crowd,” and their interests can be pursued in a “legitimate and orderly manner” (PR, pars. 302–303). Here particularity and subjectivity are given their due without being allowed to overwhelm the universality and rationality of the state.

No doubt Hegel’s strictures on democracy seem rather outdated today—not to mention his elaborate differentiation of the various estates and corporations of civil society. Nevertheless, they serve to underline just how far he is willing to go with respect to the principle of subjective freedom. As we have seen, he regards
this principle as being of the utmost importance, distinguishing the modern moral and political outlook from the substantialism and unselfconsciousness of the ancient. Nevertheless, he does not regard it as absolute. Subjective freedom ultimately remains subordinate or auxiliary to the primary good of rational freedom. Subjective freedom serves to “activate” the universal (PR, par. 260A) and endow the rational substance of the state with self-consciousness. But, in contrast with liberalism, it does not constitute the ultimate end of the state. Once again we see that, while the Hegelian state is able to accommodate most of the rights and freedoms that are found in the liberal state, its justification for doing so is very different from the conventional liberal one.

There is one further issue that should perhaps be addressed here, having to do with Hegel’s understanding of the relationship of the state to the individual. Some commentators have inferred from Hegel’s subordination of subjective or particular freedom to the rational freedom embodied in the state that he is ultimately concerned not with individual freedom at all but, rather, with freedom in some cosmic spiritual sense. This seems to be the thrust of Frederick Neuhouser’s criticism of Allen Wood’s attempt to see Hegel’s political philosophy as ultimately founded on the notion of individual self-actualization. Such a view is “misleading,” Neuhouser maintains, because Hegel’s “conception of self-actualization is derivative of his understanding of the self-actualization of Spirit. Individual self-actualization is an important notion for Hegel, but it is understood in such a way that individuals realize their essence not as individuals but as members of a collective, i.e., as vehicles of Spirit.”41

This interpretation, however, takes Hegel too far in a nonindividualistic or transindividualistic direction. While it is perfectly true, as I have argued throughout this article, that Hegel rejects the individualistic standpoint of liberalism, this does not mean that he leaps into a diametrically opposed collectivism which sees individuals only as “vehicles of Spirit.” There is something deceptive about Neuhouser’s erection of “spirit” here into a cosmic

For Hegel, the state is the realization of rational freedom. This means that it is only in the state that individuals realize their rational essence, their universality. In an important sense the state is prior to the individuals that compose it, and they are related to the state as accidents to substance. But this only means that the state is the embodiment of the rational or universal essence of individuals which constitutes their substantiality. The rational freedom embodied in the state is not different from the rational freedom of the individuals who are its members. There is no need to assume a transindividual subject of this rational freedom—cosmic Geist, or whatever—nor does Hegel do so.

Conclusion

Our brief examination of the role of subjective freedom in Hegel's political philosophy has yielded two important conclusions concerning Hegel’s complex relationship to liberalism. First, in its incorporation of subjective freedom, the Hegelian state is able to account for almost all the rights and freedoms we ordinarily associate with the liberal state. Second, though Hegel is able to provide for these liberal rights and freedoms in his state, his ultimate justification for them is not the typical liberal one. Subjective or particular freedom is not the end or purpose of the Hegelian state, as it is of the liberal state. The end or purpose of the Hegelian state is rational freedom, the willing of the universal which corresponds to the universality of the human essence. It is only through its connection to this rational freedom that subjective freedom receives its ultimate justification as the activating and self-conscious element. The rational freedom which is realized in the Hegelian state is not inimical to subjective freedom—indeed, it derives its greatest strength and depth from being conjoined to subjective freedom—but neither is it simply identical or reducible to subjective freedom. It is in this notion of the state as the realization of rational freedom that Hegel most radically departs from the instrumentalist conception of the state which predominates in liberal theory.

42. The most influential attempt to interpret Hegel as viewing individuals ultimately as vehicles of cosmic Geist remains Taylor’s Hegel.
The question that confronts us now is that of the relevance of Hegel's ideal of the rational state to our understanding of contemporary liberalism and its discontents. Of what use is Hegel's peculiar blend of liberal and nonliberal ideas—his placement of liberal political ideals in the larger context of a nonliberal theoretical justification—to the understanding and/or defense of liberalism as we near the end of the twentieth century? This, of course, is a rather large question. And in this conclusion, I mean to offer only a few sketchy—but hopefully suggestive—ideas. Nevertheless, it is a question to which any thoughtful student of Hegel's political philosophy is inevitably driven, dwelling as we do in the intact but strangely insecure edifice of liberalism in the post-Marxian and (dare I say it?) postmodern era.

As to what Hegel positively has to contribute to contemporary reflection on liberalism, we do not have to search very far. Our attention is immediately drawn to his critique of liberal individualism. Hegel offers us a way out of the atomism and narrow self-interest of traditional liberal theory. He offers us a conception of the social good that is more exalted and inspiring than mere security of life and property. And he does all this without sacrificing the individual rights and liberties which constitute the central political ideals of liberalism. With respect to these liberal rights and freedoms, Hegel sets them in a larger context which endows them with a meaning and purpose beyond the one ordinarily given them in traditional liberal theory. Subjective freedom, particularity, and even arbitrariness are not seen as ends in themselves but, rather, as essential elements in a much grander conception of the nature and overall destiny of human beings.

It is, of course, this critique of liberal individualism which contemporary communitarians have fixed upon in their appropriation of Hegel's political philosophy. As I pointed out at the beginning of this article, there is much in the communitarian interpretation of Hegel to be commended. Above all, I am sympathetic to the communitarian attempt to find in Hegel an alternative to traditional and much contemporary liberal theory. Nevertheless, my interpretation moves in a slightly different direction. Whereas communitarians have tended to emphasize Hegel's break with Enlightenment rationalism and his affinity with such romantic themes as belonging, personal wholeness, and communal solidarity, I have stressed Hegel's doctrine of rational
freedom and self-determination—a doctrine which descends from the Kantian doctrine of rational autonomy and which, far from being antithetical to Enlightenment aspirations, in some ways represents their highest fulfillment. My interpretation cuts not only against the communitarians' positive appropriation of Hegel but also against those critics of communitarianism who see Hegel as an early and antiliberal exponent of "political romanticism."{43}

For all the attractiveness of Hegel's critique of liberal individualism, however, his ideal of the rational state is not without its difficulties as an instrument for understanding and defending contemporary liberalism. In some ways these difficulties are simply the other side of the virtues of Hegel's theory of the state. What is attractive about Hegel's theory of the state, as we have seen, is that it preserves most of the individual rights and freedoms liberals prize, while at the same time placing them in a theoretical context which links them to something higher than mere self-interest, security, and arbitrariness; which links them to a more exalted conception of the rational and self-determining nature and destiny of human beings. But the question arises, is the purpose which Hegel here attributes to the state too exalted, too grand, for our current circumstances? Does his conception of the state as the actualization of rational freedom correspond, in the end, to what most people in liberal democracies currently understand the state as providing?

The answer to this question is obviously not an easy one to give. Nor is it clear that Hegel would see the deliverances of ordinary or unreflective consciousness on this issue as decisive, although he frequently invokes the agreement between philosophy and ingenuous consciousness as proof against the sophistries of the sophisticated consciousness.{44} Nevertheless, if I had to venture a guess, I would say that the vast majority of the denizens of modern liberal democracies do not view the state as Hegel viewed it, as the realization of their rational freedom, but, rather, in precisely the instrumental way he found inadequate, namely, as a vehicle for pursuing their own self-chosen ends, a necessary condition for the widest exercise of their arbitrary will.

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43. See Larmore, Patterns of Morality, pp. 91–107.
44. See, e.g., the Preface to PR.
In this regard, Hobbes and Locke continue to come much closer to the self-understanding of most members of liberal democracies than does Hegel. And perhaps even better than Hobbes and Locke is John Stuart Mill. Mill manages to combine the instrumental conception of the state typical of earlier liberalism with a more highly developed doctrine of individual self-actualization. It is this combination of a utilitarian conception of the state with a romantic conception of individuality which forms the deepest core of the ordinary citizen's belief in contemporary liberalism. The state is understood as a means to the greatest possible personal freedom, which is itself seen as a means to the greatest possible individuality and diversity. There is, of course, a great deal more to Mill than this—the belief in rational progress and so forth—but this constitutes his most enduring legacy to the contemporary self-understanding of liberalism.

A contemporary variation on this Millean and not very Hegelian theme of a limited state designed to promote the widest possible individuality is provided by Michael Oakeshott. Oakeshott may not seem the most likely thinker to bring up in connection with Mill and in opposition to Hegel. The references to Mill in his writings are at best equivocal, whereas the treatment of Hegel is generally quite positive. Indeed, a deep Hegelian strain runs through most of Oakeshott's writings. But Oakeshott's Hegelianism is largely of a methodological character. When it comes to his liberal ideal of civil association, it is the influence of Hobbes, not that of Hegel, which dominates—though Oakeshott tries valiantly to provide an interpretation of Hegel which makes him compatible with Hobbes. Civil association, for Oakeshott, is the mode of political association which best corresponds to the historic disposition of individuality, the disposition on the part of individuals "to make choices for themselves and to find happiness in doing so." No one, not even Mill, has evoked this disposition

46. I have taken this quote from Oakeshott's recently published Morality and Politics in Modern Europe: The Harvard Lectures, ed. Shirley Letwin (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 85, though Oakeshott speaks of the historic disposition to individuality in a number of places, notably, in the essays "On Being Conservative" and "The Masses in Representative Democracy," both
of individuality more subtly and beautifully than Oakeshott. And he has argued that the most satisfying liberal theory need not involve anything more than the recognition of the currency of this disposition and of the governmental arrangements appropriate to it. What is not needed are "unnecessary hypotheses" concerning human nature or "metaphysical theories of personality"—in short, just the sort of thing that Hegel's conception of the state as the realization of rational freedom explicitly invokes.47

Oakeshott's nonmetaphysical and individualistic conception of the liberal state, like Mill's, no doubt comes closer to capturing what most people today find valuable about liberal institutions than does Hegel's grandiose vision. This suggests that it may be more useful not only for understanding liberalism now "at century's end" but also for defending it against antiliberal competitors. But we should not draw this conclusion too quickly. For Oakeshott's skeptical and nonmetaphysical liberalism, like a great many other contemporary liberalisms, remains satisfied with the fact that we simply do find personal freedom and individuality valuable without explaining why we do or why we should. This leaves it somewhat defenseless against serious challenges from those who do not necessarily share the same individualistic "disposition." It is at this point that we may find ourselves groping after the something more provided by "metaphysical" theories such as Hegel's, which seek to embed liberal freedoms and institutions in a larger and more exalted conception of the rational nature and destiny of human beings. But for the moment, liberalism in the sense Hegel, if not despised, at least found radically incomplete has triumphed.

47. Oakeshott, Morality and Politics in Modern Europe, pp. 83–85.

published in Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), and in the third essay of On Human Conduct.