

Epochs of *Geist*:
Traditional Normativity as Immediate *Sittlichkeit*

“*Geist*” is Hegel’s collective term for everything that has a *history* rather than a *nature*—or, put otherwise, everything whose nature is essentially historical. *Geist* is all of our properties, doings, and institutions, specified in a suitable *normative* vocabulary. *Geist* as a whole has a history, and it is Hegel’s view that, in an important sense, that history boils down to one grand event. That event—the *only* thing that has ever really happened to *Geist*—is its structural transformation from a traditional to a modern form.

“The history of *Geist* is its own act. *Geist* is only what it does, and its act is to make itself the object of its own consciousness. In history its act is to gain consciousness of itself as *Geist*, to apprehend itself in its interpretation of itself to itself. This apprehension is its being and its principle, and the completion of apprehension at one stage is at the same time the rejection of that stage and its transition to a higher. To use abstract phraseology, the *Geist* apprehending this apprehension anew, or in other words returning to itself again out of its rejection of this lower stage of apprehension, is the *Geist* of the stage higher than that on which it stood in its earlier apprehension.” [RP §343]

Question: What exactly is it that traditional forms of life got wrong about us that modern forms of life get right? What have we gained? What is it that we have learned and incorporated into our practices and institutions that makes us *modern* selves? What is the “rise of subjectivity”?

Stage One: *Sittlichkeit*, no modern subjectivity;

Stage Two: Alienation, modern subjectivity;

Stage Three: *Sittlichkeit* (in a new form, compatible with subjectivity), modern subjectivity (in a new, *sittlich* form).

Sittlichkeit requires that practitioners identify with the norms that govern their practices. Hegelian identification is risk and sacrifice. One identifies with what one is willing to sacrifice for. *Sittlich* identification is willingness to risk and sacrifice for the norms, for what is really fitting, appropriate, or correct, for what one is in fact obliged or committed to do (normative statuses).

“This ruin of the ethical [sittlichen] Substance and its passage into another form is thus determined by the fact that the ethical consciousness is directed on to the law in a way that is essentially immediate. This determination of immediacy means that Nature as such enters into the ethical act, the reality of which simply reveals the contradiction and the germ of

destruction inherent in the beautiful harmony and tranquil equilibrium of the ethical Spirit itself.” [PG 476]

“...unalienated spirits transparent to themselves, stainless celestial figures that preserve in all their differences the undefiled innocence and harmony of their essential nature. The relationship of self-consciousness to them is equally simple and clear. They are, and nothing more; this is what constitutes the awareness of its relationship to them.” [PG 437]

“They are not of yesterday or today, but everlasting, / Though where they came from, none of us can tell.

They are. If I inquire after their origin and confine them to the point whence they arose, then I have transcended them; for now it is I who am the universal, and they are the conditioned and limited. If they are supposed to be validated by my insight, then I have already denied their unshakeable, intrinsic being, and regard them as something which, for me, is perhaps true, but also is perhaps not true. Ethical disposition consists just in sticking steadfastly to what is right, and abstaining from all attempts to move or shake it, or derive it.” [PG 437]

“However, although the Family is immediately determined as an ethical being, it is within itself an ethical entity only so far as it is not the natural relationship of its members . . . this natural relationship is just as much a spiritual one, and it is only as a spiritual entity that it is ethical. . . . [T]he ethical principle must be placed in the relation of the individual member of the Family to the whole Family as the Substance.” [PG 452]

“Death . . . is a state which has been reached immediately, in the course of Nature, not the result of an action consciously done. The duty of the member of a Family is on that account to add this aspect, in order that the individual’s ultimate being, too, shall not belong solely to Nature and remain something irrational, but shall be something done, and the right of consciousness be asserted in it.” [PG 452]

“...keeps away from the dead this dishonouring of him by unconscious appetites and abstract entities, and puts its own action in their place. . . . The Family thereby makes him a member of a community which prevails over and holds under control the forces of particular material elements and the lower forms of life, which sought to unloose themselves against him and to destroy him.” [PG 452]

“Because, on the one hand, the ethical order essentially consists in this immediate firmness of decision, and for that reason there is for consciousness essentially only one law, while, on the other hand, the ethical powers are real and effective in the self of consciousness, these powers acquire the significance of excluding and opposing one another. . . . The ethical consciousness, because it is decisively for one of the two powers, is essentially character; it does not accept that both have the same essential nature. For this reason, the opposition between them appears as an unfortunate collision of duty merely with a reality which possesses no rights of its own. . . . Since it sees right only on one side and wrong on the other, that consciousness which belongs to the divine law sees in the other side only the

violence of human caprice, while that which holds to human law sees in the other only the self-will and disobedience of the individual who insists on being his own authority.” [PG 466]

“[T]he two sexes overcome their [merely] natural being and appear in their ethical significance, as diverse beings who share between them the two distinctions belonging to the ethical substance. These two universal beings of the ethical world have, therefore, their specific individuality in naturally distinct self-consciousnesses, because the ethical Spirit is the immediate unity of the substance with self-consciousness—an immediacy which appears, therefore, both from the side of reality and of difference, as the existence of a natural difference. . . . It is now the specific antithesis of the two sexes whose natural existence acquires at the same time the significance of their ethical determination.” [PG 459]

“Human law in its universal existence is the community, in its activity in general is the manhood of the community, in its real and effective activity is the government. It is, moves, and maintains itself by consuming and absorbing into itself . . . the separation into independent families presided over by womankind. . . . But the Family is, at the same time, in general its element, the individual consciousness the basis of its general activity. Since the community only gets an existence through its interference with the happiness of the Family, and by dissolving [individual] self-consciousness into the universal, it creates for itself in what it suppresses and what is at the same time essential to it an internal enemy—womankind in general. Womankind—the everlasting irony [in the life] of the community.” [PG 475]

“The wrong which can be inflicted on an individual in the ethical realm is simply this, that something merely happens to him . . . the consciousness of [those who share] the blood of the individual repair this wrong in such a way that what has simply happened becomes rather a work deliberately done.” [PG 462]

“[S]elf-consciousness . . . learns through its own act the contradiction of those powers into which the substance divided itself and their mutual downfall, as well as the contradiction between its knowledge of the ethical character of its action, and what is in its own proper nature ethical, and thus finds its own downfall. In point of fact, however, the ethical substance has developed through this process into actual self-consciousness; in other words, this particular self has become the actuality of what it is in essence; but precisely in this development the ethical order has been destroyed.” [PG 445]

“ethical realm . . . self-consciousness has not yet received its due as a particular individuality. There it has the value, on the one hand, merely of the universal will, and on the other, of consanguinity. This particular individual counts only as a shadowy unreality.” [PG 464]

“The ethical Substance . . . preserved [its simple unitary] consciousness in an immediate unity with its essence. Essence has, therefore, the simple determinateness of mere being for consciousness, which is directed *immediately* upon it, and is the essence in the form of *custom* [Sitte]. Consciousness neither thinks of itself as this *particular exclusive self*, nor has

substance the significance of an existence excluded from it, with which it would have to become united only by alienating itself from itself and at the same time producing the substance itself.” [PG 484]

“Essence” [Wesen] here means the norms implicit in the customary practices of the traditional community (“substance”).

“This substance is equally the universal *work* produced by the action of all and each as their unity and identity, for it is the *being-for-self*, self, action.” [PG 439]

“...[a]s yet, no deed has been committed; but the deed is the actual self. It disturbs the peaceful organization and movement of the ethical world. . . . It becomes the negative movement, or the eternal necessity, of a dreadful fate which engulfs in the abyss of its single nature divine and human law alike, as well as the two self-consciousnesses in which these powers have their existence—and for us passes over into the absolute being-for-self of the purely individual self-consciousness.” [PG 464]

“Guilt is not an indifferent, ambiguous affair, as if the deed as actually seen in the light of day could, or perhaps could not, be the action of the self, as if with the doing of it there could be linked something external and accidental that did not belong to it, from which aspect, therefore, the action would be innocent.” [PG 468]

“Ethical self-consciousness now learns from its deed the developed nature of what it *actually* did. . . . The resolve [Entschluß], however, is *in itself* the negative aspect which confronts the resolve with an “other,” something alien to the resolve which knows what it does. Actuality therefore holds concealed within it the other aspect which is alien to this knowledge, and does not reveal the whole truth about itself to consciousness: the son does not recognize his father in the man who has wronged him and whom he slays, nor his mother in the queen whom he makes his wife. In this way, a power which shuns the light of day ensnares the ethical consciousness, a power which breaks forth only after the deed is done, and seizes the doer in the act. For the accomplished deed is the removal of the antithesis between the knowing self and the actuality confronting it.” [PG 469]

“Its absolute right is, therefore, that when it acts in accordance with ethical law, it shall find in this actualization nothing else but the fulfillment of this law itself, and the deed shall manifest only ethical action. . . .

The absolute right of the ethical consciousness is that the deed, the *shape* in which it *actualizes* itself, shall be nothing else than what it *knows*.” [PG 467]

The characteristically modern insight is that norms are not, as traditional forms of life implicitly took them to be, independent of the subjective normative attitudes of concept users. Alienation is the structural denial that subjective attitudes are responsible to norms which, as authoritative count as independent of those attitudes. The claim is that traditional and modern practical understandings are alike in taking it that if norms exert authority over attitudes, then attitudes cannot exert authority over norms, and *vice versa*. Either norms are independent of

attitudes and attitudes dependent on norms, or attitudes are independent of norms and norms are dependent on attitudes.

“It is . . . through culture that the individual acquires standing [Gelten] and actuality. His true original nature and substance is the alienation of himself as Spirit from his natural being. This externalization is . . . at once the means, or the transition, both of the [mere] thought-form of substance into actuality, and, conversely, of the specific individuality into essentiality. This individuality moulds itself by culture into what it intrinsically [an sich] is . . . its actuality consists solely in the setting-aside of its natural self. . . . [I]t is the contradiction of giving to what is particular an actuality which is immediately a universal.” [PG 489]

“What, in relation to the single individual, appears as his culture, is the essential moment of the substance itself, viz. the immediate passage of the [mere] thought-form of its universality into actuality; or, culture is the simple soul of the substance by means of which, what is implicit in the substance, acquires an acknowledged, real existence. The process in which the individuality moulds itself by culture is, therefore, at the same time the development of it as the universal, objective essence, i.e. the development of the actual world.” [PG 490]

“What appears here as the power and authority of the individual exercised over the substance, which is thereby superseded, is the same thing as the actualization of the substance. For the power of the individual consists in conforming itself to that substance, i.e. in externalizing its own self and thus establishing itself as substance that has an objective existence. Its culture and its own actuality are, therefore, the actualization of the substance itself.” [PG 490]

Alienation is the inability to bring together these two aspects of *Bildung*: that self-conscious individuals acknowledging the norms as binding in their practice is what makes those selves what they are, and that self-conscious individuals acknowledging the norms as binding is what makes the norms what they are. These are the authority of the community and its norms over individuals (their dependence on it), and the authority of individuals over the community and its norms (its dependence on them), respectively.

Hegel’s account of the nature of the expressively progressive development he can envisage by which the modern alienated structure of self-conscious subjectivity and social substance can give rise to a new, better structure, which overcomes alienation, and so achieves *Sittlichkeit*, while retaining the advance in self-conscious subjectivity characteristic of modernity encompasses a nonreductive account of how we should understand the place of norms in the natural world.