SHTERNA FRIEDMAN
University of California, Berkeley
shterna_friedman@berkeley.edu

Hegel's Cartesian Grounding of Political Philosophy
La fundamentación cartesiana de la filosofía política de Hegel

RESUMEN: Hegel considera que la filosofía moderna está dividida, por un lado, por su metafísica y su epistemología, y por otro, su filosofía política. Descartes habría desarrollado una metafísica de la totalidad para fundamentar la certeza epistemológica del cogito, tratando la unidad verdadera como unidad de contrarios (una totalidad). Pero la filosofía política, tanto a nivel empírico como formal, se apoya en una concepción empobrecida de unidad; considerándola, para si, como mera agregación de partes o como consistencia formal. En *La Filosofía del Derecho*, Hegel trata de subsanar esta deficiencia replicando el concepto cartesiano de totalidad para la filosofía política.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Hegel; Descartes; filosofía política; substancia; totalidad

ABSTRACT: Hegel saw modern philosophy as internally divided between its metaphysics and epistemology, on the one hand, and its political philosophy, on the other. Descartes had developed a metaphysics of totality to ground the epistemological certainty of the cogito, treating true unity as a unity of opposites (a totality). But political philosophy, in its empiricist and formalist forms, relied on an impoverished conception of unity—treating it, respectively, as a mere aggregation of parts or as formal consistency. *The Philosophy of Right* thus attempted to rectify the deficiencies of political philosophy by grounding it on the Cartesian concept of totality.

KEYWORDS: Hegel; Descartes; political philosophy; substance; totality.

I. INTRODUCTION

Hegel often relied on the language of "substance" and "totality." He thus described *Sittlichkeit* as "ethical substance."[1] He called the state "the actuality of the ethical Idea – the ethical spirit as substantial will."[2] And he said that when *Geist* takes the form of laws and institutions, it is an "organic totality."[3]

Revisionist trends in Hegel scholarship have led these passages from *The Philosophy of Right* to be overlooked for they come uncomfortably close to resurrecting the mid-twentieth-century equation of totality with totalitarianism.[4] Yet if we would like to understand Hegel on his terms, we have to understand why he turned to the concepts of "substance" and "totality," and what role they played in his political philosophy. A comprehensive evaluation is beyond my present scope, but in the short space I have I will suggest that situating Hegel's political philosophy within the larger picture he painted of the state of modern philosophy—or what we now call "early modern" philosophy—can help us understand, at least in part, why he used the concepts of substance and totality (sometimes even using them interchangeably).

Hegel thinks that modern philosophy is internally rent between its metaphysics and epistemology, on the one hand, and its political philosophy, on the other. More particularly, political philosophy relies on an impoverished conception of unity—treating it either as formal consistency or as a mere aggregation of parts. In contrast, Hegel argues that Descartes' concept of absolute substance acknowledges that true unity is a metaphysical totality—a unity of opposites. This totality, in turn, grounds a form of epistemological freedom. Set against this picture of the internal division of modern philosophy, we can see Hegel as trying to heal the divisions of modern philosophy by grounding political philosophy on the Cartesian concept of totality.

Section II will discuss Hegel's assessment of Cartesian epistemology and metaphysics. In brief, I will suggest that Hegel praises Descartes for recognizing that absolute substance is a totality that unifies opposites and thus grounds the certainty of the opposites of thought and being unified in *cogito ergo sum*.

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[1]   G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (henceforth: "PR"). Translated by A. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, §257, p. 275.

[2]   Ibid., §258. This actuality, though, is often described as an "*immediate* actuality" (ibid., §259, p. 281), which dwells therefore in the sphere of contingency (which is how the *Logic* defines "immediate actuality" [see Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* [henceforth: "Enz."] in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970, §146]).

[3]   PR §256, p. 274.

[4]   For an exception to this trend, see A. Abazari, *Hegel's Ontology of Power: The Structure of Social Domination in Capitalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Section III will reconstruct Hegel's criticisms of modern *political* philosophy, which artificially separates being from thinking. Section IV concludes with some issues that would have to be taken up in a more comprehensive treatment.

II. CARTESIAN EPISTEMOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS

Hegel describes the modern period as the time when freedom fully comes into its own, philosophically; the time when "we are at home and, like a sailor after a long voyage, we can at last shout 'Land ho.'"[5] This, in large part, is because in our day, *thinking* becomes the guiding normative principle, a principle that Hegel links to freedom.

While Hegel contends that philosophy as a whole, beginning with the Greeks, contained the notion of freedom, this does not mean that it was always present in a formulated, i.e., explicit, as opposed to implicit form. Further, in contrast to the medieval period, when people relied on *external authority* to determine both what is true and what should exist, in the modern period "thinking is the principle," such that "human beings must acknowledge and scrutinize in their own thoughts whatever is said to be normative, whatever in the world is said to be authoritative."[6] While the Reformation first manifested, in a *religious* vein, "the universal principle" of "sheer human subjectivity, sheer human freedom" or "the principle of our own human thought,"[7] it is only with Descartes that this "principle of inwardness" first took *philosophical* form, independent from "philosophizing theology," and he thus "made a fresh start in every respect."[8]

This is exemplified, first, by Descartes' method of doubt, whose importance, for Hegel, lies in its linkage of thinking with freedom: "Thinking is to be the point of departure; it is the interest of freedom that is the foundation. Whatever is recognized as true must present itself in such a way that our freedom is preserved in the fact that we think."[9] Here, Hegel directly links thinking to the interest of freedom.

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[5]   G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, 1825-26*, vol. 3 (henceforth "LHP"). Translated by R.F. Brown and J.M. Stewart with H.S. Harris. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 131. Perhaps significantly, Hegel uses a similar metaphor when discussing Heraclitus—"here we see land"—but where one is not yet home. See Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, vol. 18, p. 320. (Henceforth "TWA" cited by volume and, after a comma, page number).

[6]   LHP, p. 132.

[7]   Ibid., pp. 94-95; see also 131. See also TWA20, 120.

[8]   Hegel, LHP, pp. 132, 135, 131. See also TWA20, 70 and 120. Nevertheless, Hegel began his discussion of modern philosophy with Bacon and Böhme, seeing them as transitional figures.

[9]   Ibid., p. 139.

This seems to be a strange reading of Descartes because the aim of Cartesian doubt was epistemological, to avoid error, rather than to gain freedom. While acknowledging that Descartes' "stress" is "not on the principle of freedom," Hegel attributes this merely to a presentation that was "popular in tone," rather than to any real difference between their views. Admittedly, in the *Principles of Philosophy*—which Hegel appears to have consulted more frequently than the *Meditations*—Descartes connected doubting to freedom before asserting the principle that thinking is certain of itself as thinking.[10] But Descartes was not identifying freedom with the cleansing of thought from alien elements, or with the certainty of thinking itself, but was rather referring to the ability of free will to withhold assent from that which may be dubious. It seems that Hegel's reading of Descartes is distinctive in linking thinking to freedom.

We might see Hegel as modifying the old saw that thoughts are free. Our thoughts are free not because they can roam freely, nor because they can contemplate *any* object, but because, in a negative—or what Hegel sometimes also calls a "formal"—sense, thinking frees itself from all possible sources of contamination by the given. The act of thinking is thus independent, relying on nothing outside itself. To free itself from external authority, thought must "renounce every presupposition and prejudice,"[11] a renunciation that Hegel deems "a very great and important principle."[12] This is because "every presupposition is something found already there that thinking has not posited, something other than thinking"; to include it in thinking would mean that "thinking is not present to itself in the presupposition."[13] In this view, the method of doubt, or the rejecting of presuppositions, frees thought from what is alien or external to it. This *negative* component of freedom may be called—as we will soon see—the requirement of *absoluteness*: the requirement that since freedom cannot tolerate externality or alienness, the bearer of freedom must be absolute.

Descartes' method of doubt, though, is *not* solely negative, and thus—Hegel argues—not truly skeptical. Rather, it adopts doubt instrumentally, in order to arrive at the truth: this kind of doubt seeks to "renounce every presupposition and prejudice and commence from thinking just in order to proceed from thinking to something firm, in order that we may attain a pure beginning. The skeptics do not have this same need to arrive at something firm."[14] In fact, *rejecting* everything external to thought is affirmative in accepting

[10] Descartes, "Principles of Philosophy," In *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*. Edited by Roger Ariew. Indianapolis: Hacket Publishing, 2000, I.6-7.

[11] Hegel, LHP, p. 137.

[12] Ibid., 138.

[13] Ibid., pp. 138-39.

[14] Ibid., pp. 137-38.

only thought itself.[15] More radically, thinking *is* certainty: "What is certain is certainty [*Gewissheit*] itself, knowing [*Wissen*] as such, in its pure form as relating itself to itself—this is thinking."[16] Strikingly, then, Hegel is suggesting that freedom is an inherently epistemological phenomenon: it is a knowing as such, or certainty itself.

What, precisely, makes this Cartesian epistemology of certainty a form of *freedom* for Hegel? In one respect, the freedom in question is negative in that it is freedom *from* externality. This freedom is possible because doubt precedes the certainty of the *cogito*, and this doubt removed everything external to thought itself, that is, anything that might constrain thought. By using doubt to reject everything external to the act of thinking, we can then experience the act of thinking itself as a pure form of certainty. This is a negative form of freedom, in which freedom means being independent from an external other. But Hegel appears to have associated the *cogito* also with a positive form of freedom, according to which freedom is understood as a type of self-sufficiency—an ability to sustain and reproduce itself, and not merely an ability to insulate itself from an external other.

This positive freedom, or freedom as the ability to self-sufficiently sustain itself, connects the Cartesian *cogito* with two separate streams of thought that treat freedom as self-sufficiency—Aristotelian and Christian—and which, in turn, associate such self-sufficient freedom with the divine. As self-sufficient, the Cartesian *cogito* takes a reflexive form, certifying its own truth: having rejected everything alien to thought, thought, left only with itself, thinks only itself. It thus achieves the divine status of the Aristotelian God who thinks on its own thinking.[17] This reflexive epistemological certainty is divine also in a Christian sense. The Christian God, as the *ens* who is *causa sui*, is here associated with the *cogito*, a reflexive self-caused cause. The notion of being one's own cause requires not merely that one *not* be caused by another (negative freedom), but that one be fully self-determining (positive freedom). Thus, the *cogito*, the "I think" that is "utterly certain,"[18] takes on the characteristics of the divine, for Hegel, for thinking certifies itself—causes and maintains itself autonomously.

If Hegel sees Descartes' method of doubt as making an important advance in the development of the notion of freedom as a form of epistemology, he also

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[15] Ibid., pp. 137-39.

[16] Ibid., 139. See also Descartes, "Principles of Philosophy," I.7.

[17] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII.9 (1074b34): God's activity is "thinking of thinking" (νόησις νοήσεως). Hegel concludes his *Encyclopedia*, and thus his system of philosophy, by quoting from the original Greek of *Metaphysics* XII.7, which describes this divine activity of self-thinking (TWA10, 395).

[18] Hegel, LHP, p. 139.

sees Descartes as making yet another philosophical advance, this time in his metaphysical notion of absolute substance, i.e., God. Hegel acknowledges this metaphysical advance as a necessary complement to Descartes' epistemological proposal: Descartes' notion of absolute substance must provide a metaphysical foundation for Cartesian epistemology—by metaphysically grounding the two aspects of freedom, negative and positive, that we earlier saw Hegel attribute to Cartesian doubt.[19]

The negative aspect of freedom, or freedom from externality, is presented as a notion of "an object that requires no other thing [*Etwas*] for its existence" (i.e., substance).[20] Just as Cartesian doubt is freedom from externality, so too absolute substance must be free from externality. Further, just as the negative freedom of Cartesian doubting enables the positive freedom of the Cartesian certainty, embodied in the *cogito*, the negative freedom of absolute substance enables substance to be not merely externally free but also internally free, to be self-sufficient. Since Descartes' concept of absolute substance is the concept of God, it contains the idea of its reality—and, thus, is fully *causa sui*.

Hegel contends that this notion of self-sufficiency is present even in Descartes' account of the two finite or "created" substances: extended and thinking substance. While they are dependent on the absolute, infinite substance, each created substance is self-sufficient relative to each other: each "realm" of singular or individual things—what Descartes calls the realm of "extended things [or substance]" (*res extensa*) and the realm of a "thinking thing [or substance]" (*res cogitans*) —forms "a totality on its own account," so that both types of substance "do not need each other in order to exist; they require only the concurrence of God for that." [21] Thus, Hegel is suggesting that the notion of substance, understood as a self-sufficient totality, is an important advance in modern thought. But despite the fact that Hegel considers *each* created substance as free in the sense of being self-sufficient, only *thinking* substance is free in the epistemological sense, and it is by doubting that we come to know ourselves as aspects of a thinking substance.

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[19]   Hegel did not himself use the term "metaphysics" to describe absolute substance, but this seems to be the logic of his argument. This is not the "old" metaphysics that sees substance as a fixed underlying substrate, but a process metaphysics where absolute substance is the process of uniting differences. Logic, for Hegel, "coincides [*fällt zusammen*] with metaphysics, i.e. the science of *things* [*Dinge*] captured in *thoughts* that have counted as expressing *the essentialities of things*" (TWA8, 81).

[20]   Hegel, LHP, p. 145. See also Descartes, "Principles of Philosophy," I.51.

[21]   Ibid., p. 146. See also Descartes, "Principles of Philosophy," I.52-65, but esp. I.52 and I.60.

While Cartesian absolute substance (i.e., God) is self-sufficient (i.e., *causa sui*), what is perhaps most distinctive about it is its principle of differentiated *unity*: the unity of opposites or of differences that nonetheless remain a unity. This, of course, is the principle of unity that has become famous as an aspect of "the Hegelian dialectic." The notion of absolute substance thus enabled Descartes to link the "determination of being" (the *sum*) with thinking (*cogito*).[22] While the method of doubt had made this link manifest to the thinker in the form of epistemological certitude, Hegel described this certitude as resting on a metaphysics of absolute substance—which, as God, is the "absolute linkage between concept and actuality."[23] Or, as Hegel put it more technically in the *Phänomenologie*, "the concept of Cartesian metaphysics" is that "in themselves, being and thinking are the same."[24] This principle of unity expressed in the concept of absolute substance is, for Hegel, "on the whole the most interesting idea of modern philosophy"[25] in "express[ing] the identity of being and thinking," or the notion of a differentiated unity: "the two are a unity" in which each "is nonetheless distinct," and thus the two are "different determinations."[26]

Hegel, then, views Descartes as presenting not merely a notion of absolute substance as that which is self-sufficient, but as that which contains a unity of differences. It is in this sense that Hegel praises Cartesian absolute substance as "the genuine definition of substance, the unity of the idea and reality."[27] In short, then, Hegel acknowledges the Cartesian definition of absolute substance as a "genuine" definition, less for being *causa sui*, and more because it links together two different terms. At the same time, he is suggesting that to be *causa sui* is to contain the unity of distinct terms. He sometimes formulates this as the principle that A = (A) + (~A), which is the logical principle that unity contains difference. This principle stands in contrast to the principle of the unity of the same, i.e., the empty principle of non-contradiction, that A = A.

We will review in the next section the principle of the unity of difference—the principle of a totality. But I will conclude this section by describing Hegel's criticism of Descartes. If Descartes inaugurated modern philosophy, he did not, however, complete it. This was Hegel's task, as he claims in his *Lec-*

[22] Ibid., p. 139.

[23] Ibid., p. 145. In his lectures, Hegel tended to speak more loosely than in his published work, where he distinguished between "being" and "actuality," and "concept" and "thinking."

[24] TWA3, 427.

[25] LHP, p. 142.

[26] Ibid., p. 140; 141 (for "different determinations"). Here too Hegel spoke colloquially, running together *Identität* and *Einheit*. (In his technical writings he did not describe all identity as true unity, nor did he equate unity with identity.)

[27] Ibid., p. 145.

tures on Kantian philosophy, with the succession leading from Kant to Fichte to Jacobi, and to Schelling.

One task Descartes had neglected was to apply his metaphysics and epistemology of absolute substance to political philosophy. Further, his formulation of *cogito ergo sum* did not derive thinking from being and being from thinking, but merely created an immediate bond between the two—rather than a "mediated" one. Thus, the *cogito* does not form a syllogism with three terms—it does not form a triadic unity, the only kind of unity that Hegel thought was fully legitimate—but includes only two terms (thinking and being), with the *ergo* creating an unmediated link between these two terms. Thus, in Hegel's view, Descartes illegitimately smuggled in alien presuppositions—that is, he had not gone far enough in freeing thinking from everything external to it.[28] Likewise, Descartes had merely asserted that the absolute substance, God, is the link between the two finite substances of extension and thought, without, however, demonstrating that absolute substance is, indeed, their ground.

According to Hegel, Kant was the modern philosopher to recognize that the relationship between thinking and being is *triadic*—and thus that unity should be understood in differentiated terms. This was most evident, for Hegel, in Kant's table of categories. The categorial class of quantity, for example, was composed of unity, plurality, and a third term that Kant first called *Allheit*, but soon identified with *Totalität*: a unity of unity and plurality. The concept of totality was thus, for Hegel, intimately connected with the concept of mediated, or true, unity—which must be not dyadic but triadic: totality, the process of the dialectic, or of triadic unity. By recognizing, as Hegel put it, that synthetic judgments contain a universal that contains difference, Kant had recognized that "the schema of triplicity" is the "rhythm of cognition, of scientific movement," even though he reached for this triadic schema merely out of "instinct," in a *geistlos* manner.[29]

As for Schelling, the philosopher with whom Hegel ended his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, he too had proposed a philosophy based on "triplicity," and Hegel thought that his concept of the "absolute indifference of the subjective and the objective" expresses the notion of "the absolute or God" as "concrete and internally self-mediating."[30] Like Descartes, however, Schelling had relied on an alien presupposition: the "point of indifference . . . is presupposed, not

[28]   Ibid., pp. 141-42
[29]   TWA20, 385; see also TWA5, pp. 182ff and Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*. Translated by R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart, with H. S. Harris. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006, p. 427. [henceforth "LPR"].
[30]   LHP, pp. 269 and 260.

proved."[31] Demonstrating the absolute or God—demonstrating the absolute totality—was to be Hegel's goal in completing the modern age: to demonstrate true unity. As he put it in his *Encyclopedia*, the object of philosophy is "*the idea . . .* or *the absolute . . .* a *totality*,"[32] and the absolute totality is "*Gott*"—who is as much the object of philosophy as of religion.[33] Since God forms (for Hegel) a triune totality, philosophy, as the study of God, is the study of triadic unity: totality.[34]

III. THE DEFICIENCES OF MODERN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

If philosophy as a whole is the study of totality—of triadic unity—then political philosophy, as part of philosophy, must likewise study totality. Political philosophy, for Hegel, was the science of natural law. Yet in his early Jena texts, Hegel worries that the "science of natural law," long recognized as "an essential part of philosophy," is about to lose the status of being a science, even though, as a part of philosophy, it is capable of "attaining complete inner necessity because it is the absolute which makes it a genuine science."[35] Natural law was about lose its scientific status because it is becoming empirical, following certain sciences such as mechanics and physics that lose their scientificity when they "are content to consist of a collection of empirical knowledge." This is because a new "principle of civil law . . . has gained a special predominance over constitutional and international law" and "intrude[s] upon the absolute majesty of the ethical totality (*Totalität*)."[36] Hegel expresses this worry in 1802-3, in his *Naturrecht* essay, but it resurfaces in *The Philosophy of Right* too, notably in the Preface but also in the remarks throughout directed against legal historicists as Hugo, and against social contract theorists such as Fichte, all of whom provide, according to Hegel, an empirical rendition of the universal will.

I will focus here on his criticism in his early essay since it contains his most comprehensive analysis of the state of modern political philosophy, and presents an extended argument for reconceiving freedom as requiring the unity of opposites. *The Philosophy of Right* draws on the analysis presented in the *Naturrecht* essay, but without recapitulating it entirely.

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[31] Ibid., p. 263.
[32] Enz. §14.
[33] E.g., Enz. §19Z1, §564, §573R; LPR, p. 426; TWA1, 223.
[34] TWA17, 222.
[35] G.W.F. Hegel, *On the Scentific Ways of Treating Natural Law, on its Place in Moral Philosophy, and its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Right*. In *Hegel: Political Writings*. Edited Laurence Dickey and H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 102-3.
[36] Ibid., p. 170.

According to Hegel, modern political philosophy misunderstands freedom because it does not adequately comprehend true unity. In Hegel's diagnosis, modern political philosophy is not only divided from philosophy as a whole, but it is internally divided between two kinds of theories of natural law: the "empiricist" and the "a prioristic" (the latter of which is also called "formalist").

Empiricist natural-law theories, he argues, lack a non-empirical standard for judging which of the manifold of empirical data constitutes evidence for an inferred universal law. This lack of an explicit standard produces inconsistent conclusions, since empirical reality is rich enough to provide evidence both for and against any given thesis. At the same time, since empiricists derive universal laws from empirical reality, they must rely on *some* implicit, unrecognized—and thus contingent—standard, and so "the guiding principle for this *a priori* is the *a posteriori*."[37]

The other category of natural-law theories, which Hegel calls "formal" theories—Kant's and Fichte's—might seem opposed to empiricism. Yet since they provide empiricism with a theoretical basis, they can be considered its culmination. By treating the phenomenal world as the only legitimate object for theoretical reason, Kant justifies the empiricist valorization of a merely sensible and finite reality. He also treats intelligible concepts—God, morality, and freedom—as dogmatic principles of the practical reason, inaccessible to theoretical reason, which can only gain access to empirical phenomena. Thus, as Hegel concludes, Kant "posited" the "absolute principle of empiricism," reproducing, in a theoretically sophisticated form, the empiricist opposition between the sensible given and intellectual conceptualization.[38] In hewing to the purely formal principle of non-contradiction, Kant produced formal and empty moral laws that cannot, at least explicitly and consistently, explain empirical reality. But reality is not itself formal, so empirical elements must illicitly enter into formal theories to provide them empirical content. In this way, Hegel argues, empiricist theories of natural law internally contradict themselves, both explicitly and implicitly: empiricism denies the need for a standard but relies on one—and may become formal once it recognizes this internal contradiction; formalism denies the need for empirical content, and yet relies on it, becoming unwittingly empirical.

In effect, then, both types of natural law end up valuing finitude, atomism, and empirical subjectivity for they misunderstand the nature of unity, conceiving it either as the "manifold or as completeness" (empiricism) or as

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[37] Ibid., p. 111.
[38] Ibid., p. 106. Hegel repeats and elaborates this criticism in many other places, especially *Faith and Knowledge* (1802).

consistency (formalism).[39] In other words, empiricism and formalism do not understand "absolute unity," the unity of the one and the many.[40] Empiricist theories explicitly prioritize multiplicity, while formal theories explicitly prioritize oneness, but they both presuppose that the one is opposed to the many, where "the many" refers to "being" taken in a broad, empirical sense, as the realm of sensuous nature, including "empirical psychology" and "political economy." The many, then, is the realm of contingency, "finitude," and what Hegel calls "empirical" or "external" necessity. "The one," however, belongs broadly to "thought," the realm of the rationally necessary: principles, concepts, and general laws. But while empiricism and formalism oppose the one to the many, Hegel argues that the one and the many constitute a unity, a totality: the one is already many, and the many is already one.

Hegel's argument for the unity of the one and many is closely connected to his formal definition of freedom: its "essence and its formal definition [*Definition*] is precisely that nothing is absolutely external [*nichts absolut Äußeres ist*]."[41] While criticizing Fichte, Hegel suggests that this is the most primitive definition of freedom, the source of all other definitions—they must retain the formal concept at a minimum, if they are to even be definitions of *freedom*. At first sight this seems a minimalist definition, one that might be accepted by practically everyone; this is the negative freedom I discussed above. Its "minimalism," though, is extremely demanding in suggesting that *true* freedom requires limitlessness—what I will call the requirement of "absoluteness": that is, to possess freedom one must be, literally, loosened or detached from another, or complete in oneself, such that one is fully self-sufficient.[42] Indeed, Hegel goes on to suggest that this formal definition leads to some radical conclusions.

Let me discuss just one conclusion: a reworking of the notion of unity into that of totality, a differentiated unity. The empiricist theorists of natural law treat unity as nothing but multiplicity, while the formal theorists of natural law treat it as a single oneness, or the universal that is *opposed* to private interest. In the case of Fichte's account of natural law, this opposition between the universal and private interest manifests itself in his conception that the sphere of morality is opposed to that of legality. Yet Hegel suggests that morality and legality are not opposed, but two manifestations of the same unity. This suggestion follows from the definition of formal freedom as freedom from externality. If formal freedom is possible, then unity cannot be understood as an aggregation, be-

[39] Ibid., p. 109.
[40] Ibid., p. 110.
[41] Ibid., p. 136.
[42] This literal range of meanings is what Hegel (and other German Idealists) meant to evoke by *Absolut*.

cause this is to treat the parts being added to one another as initially existing externally to one another, i.e., unfreely, which violates the formal definition of freedom. Nor can unity be understood as a static "oneness" that stands opposed to the many particulars; this would set apart the many from the one, likewise violating the constraints of formal freedom. Thus, formal freedom leads to a radical reworking of the notion of unity: any possible opposition (formal or real) cannot be external but immanent to the bearer of freedom. If the one and the many should be possible—if the universal and the particular are to be possible—*and* if formal freedom is to be possible, then unity must be conceived as containing all opposition within itself.

This type of unity, recall, is what Hegel finds in Descartes's concept of absolute substance, which Hegel thinks is free because it contains opposition within itself: it is negatively free for it is free from external constraint (since it lacks an external other that might constrain it); it is positively free for it is internally self-sufficient, mediating its own internal oppositions. In the *Naturrecht* essay Hegel describes the type of unity of absolute substance as a totality—an "absolute ethical totality": a type of organized whole in which "the positive of ethical life consists."[43] This "absolute ethical totality is nothing other than a *people*."[44] While Hegel does not spell out the logic of the freedom of the absolute ethical totality, if a totality is free because it is the unity of the determinacies of the many and the one, then the absolute ethical totality can be said to be free in this way for it combines the many and one in the form, respectively, of the legal and moral system. The legal system grants the multitudinous individuals private property rights and permits their manifold finite, empirical individualities some room to flourish; the moral system that aims to universalize individuals grants them the right of a higher, not merely empirical but rational subjectivity. Together, they constitute the absolute ethical totality.

Yet by including the legal system within itself, the totality negates an aspect of itself. For to include finitude within itself is to include forms of unfreedom (such as self-interested contracts and crime), or to permit mere empirical freedom, which threatens to negate the totality's absolute freedom. "Giving up and sacrificing part of itself" to empirical necessity or the empirical freedom of individual subjective contingencies, the totality sacrifices some of its universality to finitude, sacrificing aspects of itself to finitude.[45] But it also negates

[43] Ibid, p. 138.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., p. 151. Hegel considers this the "enactment, in the ethical realm, of the tragedy which the absolute eternally plays out within itself" (ibid.).

this finitude by relegating the legal system's protection of the multiplicity to just one "moment" of the whole.[46]

In this sacrifice, the absolute ethical totality proves that it has yet another form of freedom—the freedom to negate itself. This freedom to negate its own infinity in order to allow for finitude means that the totality grounds not just its own freedom, but the freedom of individuals—the freedom of individual (abstract, legal) rights. This is to suggest, in effect, that Hegel understands the Cartesian concept of totality as a metaphysical grounding: the totality itself, by being free, can freely negate aspects of itself. What this means is that the unity of the state—the unity of its universal will—is neither an aggregative, empiricist unity nor a formalist unity. The state, the universal, must include particularity within itself, or infinity must dwell in finitude. The ethical totality, then, the universal of the state, includes its opposite within itself: the particularity and finitude of the legal and political economic realm. (This is what Hegel later called civil society.) Yet the presence of particularity does not negate the unity of the state, for as a totality, the state is the unity of unity and plurality.

If Hegel's early essay on natural law began the process of grounding political philosophy on the concept of totality, his mature political philosophy aims to do so even more systematically. As I mentioned earlier, Hegel understands the differentiated unity of a totality as taking a triadic form—the form of the dialectic. Thus, not only is Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* divided into three parts (abstract right, morality, and *Sittlichkeit*), but so is *Sittklichkeit* (family, civil society, and the state), and even the state (the internal state, the external state, and world history). But more important than the triadic structure of *The Philosophy of Right* is Hegel's view of "objective spirit"—the realm of legal, moral, social, and political philosophy—as the realm of an "organic totality."[47] Spirit becomes objective when it takes the form of laws and insitutions, including within itself property and contract law—the law that grants individuals the freedom of abstract rights. In this way totality grounds both its own freedom and the freedom of individuals.

IV. SUBSTANCE AND TOTALITY

We are now in a position to return to the question raised at the start of this paper: why did Hegel turn to the concepts of totality and substance in order to talk about political philosophy, the state, and *Sittlichkeit*? My review of Hegel's picture of the state of modern philosophy suggests that Hegel conside-

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[46]   It does this, in part, by placing its individual members in danger of death, from time to time, by means of war, in which the individual "proves his oneness with the people in a negative sense . . . by the danger of death" (ibid., p. 140).

[47]   PR §256, p. 274.

red political philosophy in bad shape, torn between empiricist and formalist theories of natural law. Yet empiricism and formalism each presuppose the other; empiricism presupposes a formalist standard by which to evaluate the infinite empirical data it unearths, while formalism implicitly relies on empiricism when it wishes to say anything about the world that is more than an empty tautology. Misunderstanding themselves, the political philosophy torn between these two extremes has no coherent concept of unity, treating it as a unity of an aggregate multiplicity or as a formal oneness. And misunderstanding unity, empiricism and formalism misunderstand the nature of political freedom: empiricist theories of natural law, such as social contract theory, treat the universal will as a mere aggregate of wills, and even formalist theories such as Fichte's—having collapsed into empiricist theories—follow suit.

This means that empiricists and formalists lack the resources to properly theorize the state itself—whose principle is the universal will. Thus, for example, while Hegel ascribed to Rousseau the "merit" of seeing the "*will* as the principle of the state"—a principle that Hegel understood as having *thought* (*Gedanke*) for both its form and content—he criticized Rousseau, along with Fichte, for nevertheless having had apprehended

> the will only in the determinate form of the *individual* will [*einzelnen Willens*] . . . and [apprehended] the universal will [*allgemeinen Willen*], not as the will's rationality in and for itself, but only as the *communal thing* [*Gemeinschaftliche*] arising from this individual will *as conscious* [*einzelnen Willen* als bewußtem]. Thus, the union [*Vereinigung*] of individuals within the state becomes a *contract* [*Vertrag*], which therefore has for its basis [*Grundlage*] their arbitrary will [*Willkür*], opinion [*Meinung*], and gratuitous, explicit consent.[48]

As this passage from *The Philosophy of Right* suggests, Hegel thinks that Rousseau and Fichte misunderstood the basis of the state—treating it as a mere aggregate of wills, as a "communal" or common will, rather than truly "universal." Hegel's earlier criticism of empiricist and formalist nature law theory gives us a broader context in which to understand what Hegel takes to be Rousseau and Fichte's mistake: it stemmed from an inadequate account of unity, including an inadequate account of *political* unity.

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[48]   Ibid., §258Z, p. 277, trans. modified. See also TWA20, 307-8 for this criticism of Rousseau. In both places, Hegel first praises Rousseau for understanding that the rational foundation [*Grundlage*] of the state should be the free will, then criticizes him and Fichte for mistaking the rational or universal will for the individual will, which can produce, via contract, only a "common" (*gemeinsam*) or "communal" [*gemeinschaftlich*] will. While the mature Hegel mentions Rousseau in criticizing social contract theory, his earliest criticism singled out Fichte as his main intellectual opponent.

In contrast, as Hegel sees it, true unity must be understood as a totality—or what Hegel also, at times, describes as a substance: a concept developed in philosophical form by modern metaphysics. If modern political philosophy wishes to understand the basis of the state, and wishes to ground individual freedom, it had to turn to modern metaphysics, particularly to the Cartesian notion of absolute substance. In Hegel's reading, absolute substance is free in a negative sense because it is absolute, infinite, limitless, unlike a finite individual, for it has no other outside of it who might constrain it. But it is also free in a positive sense, because it contains its otherness inside of itself, rather than outside of itself, and can mediate between itself and its internal other. Absolute substance is self-sufficient, *causa sui*—the cause of its own internal operations. And being *causa sui*, it also has the ability to negate itself, to sacrifice some of its infinity to make space for its internal other, finitude. Hegel thus sees the notion of totality as able to ground the concept of a state, an ethical totality, which negates its own infinity in order to include within itself the finite operations of legal processes that promote various forms of individual freedom. It is not common to link Hegel's political philosophy to the Cartesian concept of a metaphysical totality, but as my account suggests, Hegel takes Cartesian metaphysics as grounding political philosophy.

Let me conclude by briefly analyzing one issue that would have to be addressed in a longer treatment of Hegel's conception of totality. Hegel argues that "thinking, or the spirit, has to place itself at the standpoint" of absolute substance,[49] but absolute substance "is not yet the whole truth, for substance must also be thought of as inwardly active and alive, and in that way must determine itself as spirit."[50] Substance is the stage at which *Geist* first begins to exist as an immanent totality: "Substance is hereby the totality of the accidents in which it reveals itself as their absolute negativity, i.e., as *absolute power* [*Macht*]."[51] The concept of substance is in Hegel's *Logic* the moment when the concept of actuality (*Wirklichkeit*)—after having taken the form of contingency (*Zufälligkeit*) and possibility (*Möglichkeit*)—takes the form of necessity (*Notwendigkeit*). Thus, the "absolute power" of substance is "the power

    [49] LHP, p. 154. This is what he sees as the "standpoint of Spinozism" (ibid.), which he saw as the "carrying out or execution of Descartes's principles" (ibid., p. 151).

    [50] Ibid., p. 154. Hegel repeats this often, e.g., the "*absolute substance* of Spinoza is not yet the absolute *spirit*, and it is rightly demanded that God must be determined as absolute spirit" (*Enz.* §50, TWA8, 133), but most famously in the *Phenomenology*: "Everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*" (TWA3, 23). See also Hegel's frequent praise and criticism of Spinoza (and the Eleatics and Schelling) in, e.g., Enz. §151Z. See also HEGEL, *Science of Logic*. Translated by George DI GIOVANNI. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 71, 129, 212, 333, and 472-74.

    [51] Enz. §151, TWA8, 294.

of necessity."[52] But when *Geist* restricts itself to substance alone, or to necessity alone, it merely manifests itself as *formal* freedom. Recall that Hegel saw the virtue of the modern notion of freedom as the *epistemology* of the cogito, the achievement of knowledge as self-certainty. Knowing requires a knower who not only metaphysically unifies opposites, but who knows that it is doing so: *Geist* knowing itself as *Geist*. Thus, a full account of Hegel's understanding of freedom would have to explain how epistemological freedom (or freedom "for itself") can emerge from and be built upon metaphysical freedom (or freedom "in itself").

While much remains to be done to flesh out the account provided here, I hope that the current treatment suggests that Hegel advanced a notion of totality that is overdetermined. On the one hand, he seems to have considered totality, as a unity of the opposites of being and thinking, as a metaphysical requirement for an epistemological understanding of full freedom as a type of certainty or self-knowing. On the other hand, he also seems to have thought that the notion of totality is a logical derivation from a formal notion of freedom, which requires that all opposites be immanentized rather than externally pitted against one another. Thus, he claimed that the notion of freedom requires a metaphysics—regardless of whether one begins from a formal notion of freedom and derives from it a metaphysics to account for its possibility, or from a "full" notion of freedom in its epistemological sense, as self-knowing, and infers from this the necessity of a metaphysics to ground this knowing. In either case, the metaphysics of freedom requires the metaphysics of totality—which Hegel also calls the metaphysics of absolute substance—which is the metaphysics that he praises Cartesian modern philosophy for theorizing. At the same time, he criticizes modern *political* thought for the notion of freedom exemplified in social contract theory, which not only cannot meet the requirements of a formal definition of freedom but loses track of the notion of freedom encapsulated in its own metaphysics and epistemology. His criticism seems to have been a preliminary attempt to reground the state on the concept of totality to heal the division between modern metaphysics and modern political thought.

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