

**Hegel-Jahrbuch  
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# Hegel-Jahrbuch 2014



Herausgegeben von  
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Begründet von  
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# Hegel gegen Hegel I

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Herausgegeben von  
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in Verbindung mit  
Önay Sözer und Alper Turken

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## Hegel and Europe: preliminary considerations<sup>1</sup>

### 1

In view of the current condition of the European Union it may seem an irrelevant, or indeed an annoying exercise in style, to address the issue of Europe and philosophy. The case of Greece seems indubitably to prove this pointlessness. In a trivial formulation we might ask ourselves: If the birthplace of European philosophy represents a threat to the rest of Europe in the eyes of many, how could we think philosophy might have the least relevance for the future of Europe?

But let's try to put aside these trivial misunderstandings. By dealing with the issue of Europe and philosophy, I am not aiming to provide direct solutions to topical geopolitical problems. Nobody would normally charge a philosopher with the task of working out a solution to a specific economic, political, religious, or military crisis. Finding these solutions would rather seem to be a matter for politicians, or in more recent times for technocrats. Here I am actually confronted with the case of Italy. Italy has now (in 2012) a technocratic government, which is a non-elected government that should at least theoretically act without political, ideological or idealistic motivations. They are only there to solve a problem. The standard of their success or failure is itself a technical one: economical growth, ability to compete on the markets, or merely the reduction of the infamous „spread“, that is, the difference in value between Italian and German government bonds.

Philosophy obviously has nothing to do with that. Philosophy cannot show the way out of the crisis, but it can use the crisis as an occasion for critique. It can do so because philosophy is occupied with a dimension which is itself not grounded in or made explicit by technical means. Should, for example, our technocratic government propose to limit the rights of workers in a very aggressive way so as to enable Italy to compete with China on the global market, then we would surely have problems with it to the extent such proposal would collide with a dimension that is not itself „technical“. In fact, we lay claim to the respect and enhancement of values such as human freedom, dignity, personality, self-realization, and others. We may disagree on the right strategy in pursuing this aim, but normally we agree at least on the recognition of the existence of this dimension.

Once we recognize it, there are different strategies to establish and enforce this latter. For my purpose, it is enough to draw a very simple and pragmatic differentiation between philosophical and non-philosophical strategies. The non-philosophical ones have in common the fact that they do not entirely proceed conceptually and discursively. Let's take as an example a religious strategy. Such a strategy would of course allow us to ask for reasons and grounds, but at some point (which might come very soon or very late) we cease to proceed discursively, referring instead to a truth of a higher level that is not accessible and available to human beings. If, for example, we ask for the grounds of human freedom, in the end we will be referred to a non-circumventable divine revelation. Other types of non-philosophical strategies refer to an aesthetic, mythological, nationalistic, or traditional datum as a foundation. We might also call non-philosophical strategies „positive“ since they refer to a posit, a given *datum*, that cannot be questioned. If we want to question it or to explain it, then we are already engaging in a philosophical strategy. In strategies

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that make reference to a positive foundation, we are dealing with truth standards that are, in different ways and to different degrees, external to discursivity, in that discursivity finds its own limit in them. For the philosophical strategy, by contrast, philosophical discourse is the only truth standard: we are thus dealing with an immanent truth standard. The truth of philosophical statements cannot be verified or falsified with reference to external standards, but only through philosophical means. A philosophical argument on God cannot be settled by reference to the Bible..

What does this have to do with Europe? I say: everything. Because the very appeal to the strategy of philosophical foundation constitutes the characteristic trait of European identity, at least in modernity. This does not mean, of course, that public life in modern Europe was guided at every point by rational standards, but only that there are such standards and that in case of conflicting demands we can require that these demands be submitted to those standards. As a matter of fact, even the supporters of religious claims are called upon and even forced to develop and defend their arguments in a rational fashion. Today even a religious fundamentalist would have problems attacking homosexual unions just by referring to a foundational religious text. He might for example try to argue that it is rational that only the unions with procreation as a purpose be recognised and protected by law. He knows he has a better chance by choosing a philosophical strategy over a positive one, or at least by instrumentally pretending it is so, because the truth standards (I take the word „truth“ here in a very minimal sense) are structured in that way.

So a provisional answer to the question, „Why Europe and philosophy?“ might go like this: Because, differently than in other cultures, the philosophical model of foundation and justification, of mutual recognition, of reason-giving and – ascribing, etc., is characteristic of and a essential to the identity of (modern) Europe.

We understand the principle of philosophical thought and the principle of shaping reality as one and the same: the absolute freedom of the subject. If a particular shape of reality (be it a political shape or what have you) cannot be reconstructed philosophically, then it is not an expression of the subject's freedom, it is not „rational“, and demands reformation. In this sense philosophy has an orientating function for Europe, whereas this is not the case for other cultures. Talking about Europe and philosophy can at least help to better formulate some questions, among them our understanding of freedom in modern Europe and its adequate configurations, of civil and social rights, the admission of further countries to the European Union, and so on. It is therefore worth dealing with the issue of Europe and philosophy, even if we cannot expect it to result in a lower legal retirement age!

## 2

Now to Hegel's relevance for this issue. I hope to contribute to a mutual clarification of both the terms „Europe“ and „Hegel“ by examining their interconnection with each other. I am convinced that the deepest motive of Hegel's philosophy lies in reconstructing European identity. This is sure to sound odd since there is no Hegelian statement to this effect and even his explicit statements on Europe are few. My thesis can only be defended indirectly. No one will contest that Hegel's philosophy is above all a philosophy of human freedom. In opposition, say, to Kant and Fichte (or to Hegel's image of them), Hegel insists that freedom has to be conceived concretely, that is, not as a universal principle transcending historical and empirical conditions, but as self-shaping subjectivity (the „Idea“), which is actualised only when it is living in an adequate embodiment. Actual freedom always has an empirical form, it is always concrete together with this empirical form (concrete, from Latin „cum-cresco“, „to grow together“). Freedom is always a concretion of reason and external existence.

According to Hegel, this freedom finds its most adequate configuration in the modern European state, but not because this state is itself wholly rational and divine, as many Hegel-inter-

pretations would have one believe. The modern state is founded on the acknowledgement that the human subject is free as such, and not as a holder of peculiar qualities (nationality, religion, a certain amount of property and so forth). But this acknowledgement can be actualised only through adequate concrete forms, or, more aptly: only certain forms can be recognised as embodiments of that free subjectivity. Without these forms there would not be that freedom, and without that freedom there would not be those forms. This is the general meaning of the notorious Hegelian statement that what is rational is also actual and what is actual is also rational. The critical reconstruction, foundation and legitimation of the actuality of freedom in the forms of modern Europe (not only political, but also religious, social, aesthetic, philosophic etc.) are, I believe, the deepest motives of Hegel's philosophy. Hegel explicitly defines the freedom of the subject not only as the principle of Modernity (cf. *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, remark to § 124), but also freedom in the „European sense“ (*Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*, remark to § 503).

Hence even though Hegel scarcely thematises Europe, I believe no other philosopher has dealt with it in a more profound sense. On a Hegelian basis, one might even say that philosophy and Europe cannot be conceived without one another. If we give up the understanding of philosophy as the reconstruction of freedom in its concrete embodiments, we are giving up an essential part of modern European identity. Vice versa, if we cease to believe that the principle of subjective freedom is essential to Europe, including within the global geopolitical context, then we will have to resort to other spiritual forms for our self-understanding. I recognise this approach to be radical and legitimately open to challenges, but I also believe that an approach inspired by Hegel would only go unchallenged if were already dead.

I will very briefly discuss some main features of Hegel's philosophy that can serve as basic coordinates to begin our discussion of European identity. As mentioned above, the principle of subjective freedom and the identity-constituting, orienting role of philosophy belong together. However, as philosophy does not rely on any *positum*, on any given *datum*, it is clear that this orienting role can as a result never have a static empirical identity. Of course, Hegel understands the system of the pure forms of thought (the logic) as conclusive and non-revisable. But the philosophical understanding of reality based on those forms can never come to a definitive end (as Fukuyama's thesis of the „end of history“ would have it). Hegel, unlike many of his interpreters, never maintained anything like that.

As is well-known, Hegel defines philosophy as „its own time apprehended in thoughts“ (*Grundlinien*, Preface). This definition confirms that a philosophy without connection to the given forms of reality is a hollow construct. However it compels us to deal with a critical point that seems to interfere with the attempts to use Hegel's thought for our time. This definition is often read as a proof of Hegel's quietism: if philosophy is only its own time apprehended in thoughts, then, it seems, philosophy cannot contribute to changing the world, and we can only accept the world as it is. This conclusion seems of course also to be implied by another famous Hegelian statement, according to which „the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the falling of dusk“ (*Grundlinien*, Preface). In these passages the idealist Hegel seems actually to be a realist, maybe even too much of a realist. And just this realism is what I appreciate with regard to the issue of Europe. These statements do indeed teach us that philosophy always arrives too late to teach the world how it should be. By drafting some ideal picture or plan according to which the world should be changed or improved, philosophy places itself in a structural delay, beyond space and time, and condemns itself to non-actuality. Philosophy is only actual when it conceptually shows us that some empirical forms or structures are obsolete and must be revised. But then it is up to other forces to actually proceed to this revision. And of course those other forces (politics, public opinion, conflicting interests) will act with their own instruments and through their own ways, which may eventually reveal themselves as in need of revision! Confining philosophy to this task may seem reductive, but this is the highest task with which philosophy can be entrusted. If philosophy told us what to do and how to do it, then it would be religion, not philosophy. In that case philosophy would need to refer to a given funda-

mental content, and hence would eventually limit subjective freedom. Hegel's understanding of philosophy places men in the condition of freely acting (and of freely doing wrong) and it provides us with the possibility of a critical, self-conscious reconciliation with reality. Philosophy tells us that this world is the space of our free action, but does not provide us with prescriptions about how we should act.

### 3

As a matter of fact, this absence or refusal of given positive standards is nothing but the reverse side of Hegel's own dialectical self-understanding of philosophy. This is of course a huge topic; here I just want to outline some implications for the issue of European identity. According to Hegel, every content, both the logical and the actual, entails three moments: 1) the abstract-intellectual, 2) the dialectical-negative, and 3) the speculative-positive moment (cf. *Enzyklopädie*, § 79). What this means is that at first I have an object or a determination that I know in its immediate singularity, in its abstraction from the totality of objects or determinations. Then the object sublates itself into its opposite. At this point we already have a totality of determinations, because we have the starting object as well as everything opposed to it. However, we initially have this totality merely as a set of oppositions and not yet as a unity. Only in the third moment, the speculative one, do we grasp the totality of determinations as a unity. This unity is however not simply given or presupposed anymore, but it is the result of a process of mediation. The negation is hence essential to the process of identification and determination of any object. We have to negate and sublata the immediacy of the given object in order to be able to know it affirmatively. We have to get rid of something in order to go further on our way. But we do not remain stuck in the negation; instead, a new, positive (though mediated and not immediate) determination arises from it. In this sense I speak of the „reconstructive“ power and performance of Hegel's philosophy.

It ought to be clear that this third moment is in no way a static one. The moment of negation is not simply over and done with; it is preserved and actualised in the result, as indicated by the word *Aufheben*, „sublate“. Hence every truth holds in itself its own negation: truth is to be grasped as a dynamic process, not as an unreviseable statement. This central Hegelian conception seems to me to be of the highest relevance with regard to the issue of European identity. European identity is not something „immediate“. If we take *any* particular form *whatsoever* (for example the Christian religion) as *the* basis or the ultimate root of European identity, we fall prey to a logical error, mistaking the infinite dynamic essence of the concept for a particular empirical identity, and vice versa. We must on the contrary renounce *every* given form as *the* identity, permanently questioning *all* given forms through a process of philosophical reconstruction. The only possible conceptually justifiable European identity consists in the renunciation of *any one* positively given and fixed identity.

We can thus assess the necessity for mediation as the dynamic structure of European identity. We are always already within this process of mediation, not in some transcendent place outside of it. Europe can never simply *be there*, it must continually become something else, a project for the understanding and the critique of the present and the shaping of the future. This understanding, critique and shaping, however, must always result from a conceptual reconstruction of the concreteness of reality, lest we lose ourselves in a utopia or uchronia. The political unity of Europe is itself, of course, the result of an infinite process of mediation. This unity is not original or immediate, but arises from the difference between its states and cultures, whose unity cannot be suddenly established through a contract. The dialectic between the differences and the unity can never be a zero-sum-game. The parts and the totality have to grow on each other. The strength and weakness of the European project lies in this structural, irremediable need for mediation. And Hegel's dialectical-speculative conception of philosophy

seems to me still to provide the most powerful and adequate instrument for carrying on this mediation.

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