

Hegel and Ethics: An overview

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Abstract

Hegel's view of law and ethics, involving as it does also his view on politics and history, is basically at variance with prevailing views, the concept of the state being that of a community rather than of an institution. The failure to grasp this divergence of the concept of the state, as Hegel uses it, has been the source of most of the misunderstandings. For if the prevailing modern concept of the state as primarily a government, an institutional manifold comprising those who exercise command functions in the community is substituted for Hegel's essentially Aristotelian conception of the state as the highest community, there arise immediately authoritarian, not to say totalitarian implications which are far removed from the essential liberalism of Hegel's conception. For the monarchical predilection of Hegel is in line with the liberal thought not only in Germany, but in England (Burke, Macaulay) and France (de Tocqueville, Benjamin) as well. But it was a conservative liberalism which, inspired by a sense of history and hence of growth, was nonetheless anxious to avoid radical change and above all revolutionary upheavals.

Hegel's approach to law is closely tied to his central concern with religion. Ethics is the concrete ethical world of social life. For Hegel, it is a higher form which he contrasts with the "abstract subjectivity" of mere morality. Mere morality constitutes the "sphere within which the will operates as an "independent identity"; the person becomes a subject. Ethics is more concrete precisely because it is more objective, but for its actualization it requires the state. Hegel adduces an anecdote: "To a father who asked how he might best bring up his son, a Pythagorean answer: By making him the *citizen of a state with good laws*." This anecdote is very revealing about Hegel himself; for the state that the Greek had in mind was the *polis*, the highest community, which to Hegel is the objective realization of any genuine freedom.

In a sense, these are elaborate tautologies, and identifications. But such identifications have a most important

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