

## The Children of Kant and Hegel: *The Encyclopaedia Logic* and Liberalism

The purpose of this paper is to explore Hegel's thought, as explicated in *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, and its implications for modern liberalism<sup>1</sup>. It is my contention that this formulation of liberalism has withstood two similar attacks, first in the form of Hegel's reaction against Kant, and, in the 20th century, the communitarian critique of Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*. Taking a queue from Hegel, the paper will assume a triadic structure wherein I will spend time exploring both attacks, considering how the second was in sense a restatement of the first, and ultimately conclude with some areas where a sublation of the two accounts may lead us to a more compassionate enlightenment.

### Part 1: Hegel vs. Kant

One of the central tenets linking liberalism to Kant was Kant's belief that individuals have the capacity to become "free moral agent[s]" (Sandel, "Procedural" 84). They do this by adhering to self-willed laws (or duties) for moral action, which are subjective in that they are self-willed, and objective in that they are universal. Liberalism, on this view, amounts to a conception of a plurality of persons united under a universal rule or law; in Kantian liberalism, this could be something like the categorical imperative, which does not prescribe rules as such, but instead a form for determining moral action. This places it as being a largely formal worldview. This formalism will be the focus of

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<sup>1</sup> I am concerned in this paper primarily with Kantian liberalism, duty-based liberalism that I believe would offer resistance to other ethical or political formulations, including not only communitarianism, but utilitarianism, libertarianism, and laissez-faire capitalism as well. What I do not claim, however, is that the liberal society we *currently* live in is in accordance with Kantian liberalism. And while some may wonder if Kant can be considered a liberal in light of some of his political commentary—for his adherence to retributive justice, for instance—I believe that Kant's basic moral guidelines, that individuals ought to live according to self-willed yet universal laws, and that individuals have the duty to treat others as ends in themselves, provides the strongest basis for a liberal structure. Indeed, an individual may plausibly claim, for instance, that Kant's own moral guidelines be used to argue *against* retributive justice.

my following comments, and the basis for two of the most prominent attacks on liberalism.

Hegel's primary method for addressing the formalism question is his collapsing of the subjective and the objective. We can draw parallels here as well between the is and the ought, or the ideal and the actual/real. Whereas Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena leaves us with a gap that separates objects from other objects (including persons), Hegel intends to show that our perception of things cannot be limited only to our subjective state, but also must be "determinations of objects themselves" (86).

In this way we may view Hegel as bridging the gap between idealism (the inner) and empiricism (the outer). The principle of empiricism, as he puts it, is that "we ought to see for ourselves" (77)—a statement that notes both the observable ("see") and the subjective ("we") aspects of empiricism. This implicit insight into empiricism is made more explicit later, when Hegel emphasizes the subjective aspect of empiricism, that "thinking the empirical world essentially means altering its empirical form" (96). What we would normally count as objective, i.e. empirical observation, thus contains within it a necessary hint of subjectivity.

Idealism is likewise sublated in that Hegel claims Kant's categories are "empty on their own account and have their application and use only in experience" (86). Hegel's charge is that Kant's philosophy "has nothing to do with the content" (89)—a charge we will see anticipates communitarian critiques of liberalism, which I will examine later. This idealism is overly dependent on form—for instance, in the Platonic, ideal sense of a perfect form that actual objects are compared to, and in the more general sense that a rule

can provide the basis for a freer operation within it than from without it. Some examples will serve to make Hegel's critique of form clear.

If we focus on quality and quantity, for instance, Hegel demonstrates that form is not neutral: The size of a state's territory or the amount of people it has will affect its constitution (172). In a more concrete way, instruments fitted with strings will produce qualitatively different sounds when the quantity of the string is increased or decreased (169). If we focus on reason, Hegel claims that human development provides the content to abstract form. A child's inner nature "is made actual by education," and similarly a criminal's external punishment must be thought of as "the manifestation of his own criminal will" (211). So too with a child who is baptized, who only through a religious education will truly come to know the Christian faith (116). And in terms of choice, Hegel claims that "nothing, either in heaven or on earth ... exhibits the abstract 'either-or'" (187). He emphasizes instead internal and simultaneous contradictions, a claim that Kierkegaard will later take issue with.

What these sort of examples show is that we cannot divide either the world or persons into dual spheres—actuality is a "unity of inner and outer" (213) and satisfaction "is peace between subject and object" (281).

But this mashing of dualisms into one does a disservice to the mental world<sup>2</sup>. Hegel may take issue with pragmatists who aim to reduce historical figures to their isolated "drives" and "passions" (212), instead holding that "man is nothing but the series of his acts" (212), but this seems, rather than just a mild corrective to a hubristic individualism, to seriously discount the role that mind plays in our lives. This is the major

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<sup>2</sup> By "mental world" I refer to mental states as they are experienced from the inside. Some philosophers call this "qualia."

source of tension between Hegel and liberalism. Where Kant recognizes a moral law as the self-willed universal rule that can keep individual consciousness in check, Hegel tends towards this discounting of individual mind, instead linking it to universal collectiveness as in “the fatherland,” “justice,” and “religious truth” (212).

In some instances we would be right to assent to Hegel’s view. It would be strange to consider an individual a great musician if he played poorly, or to hold the opinion that someone who repeatedly fumbles the ball can be considered a great athlete, merely because he believes he is. But in other instances the inner life needs to be respected, and cannot be conflated with the external or objective view. Not all that is present in mind can be reflected outwardly, and this has implications not just for determining a person’s self-identity but for ethics as well. Inner intentions matter a great deal in questions of morality, and the discounting of individual mind and the fundamental importance of its subjective state is one step in dismantling the Kantian view that the motivation behind action counts to determine its moral worth. Once individual mind has been shown to not only work dialectically, but to operate within a dialectic, an onward march of collective teleology becomes inevitable. Individuals are subsumed into their communities, nations, and historical setting. This sets the stage for another attack on liberalism.

## Part 2: Communitarians vs Liberals

The forerunners of liberalism and communitarianism are sometimes considered to be Kant and Hegel. Kant’s moral system of equality based on a categorical imperative that is by design universal fits well with modern deontological liberalism of the sort revitalized by Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*. Similarly, Hegel’s critique of Kant’s formalism anticipates the later communitarian critiques of liberalism which holds that it is a formal

structure that lacks content. Michael Sandel, generally held along with Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Michael Walzer as one of the most prominent communitarians, has said that communitarianism does indeed echo both Hegel and Aristotle (“Political” 61). While my comments in this section will pertain to some specifics concerning liberals and communitarians in the 20th century, I believe it will shed some light on the preceding divide between Kant and Hegel, who we can read as residing one level up in a philosophical ladder of abstraction.

Charles Taylor has described communitarianism as consisting of two issues: The ontological question of whether society is best described as atomistic or holistic, and the advocacy question of morality, broadly defined as an individualist-collectivist continuum (*Philosophical* 181-182). According to Taylor, the major difference between liberals (such as Rawls, Dworkin, Nagel, etc.) and communitarians is that liberals think the state ought not make a value claim about any particular conception of the good life, whereas communitarians hold that such a conception is necessary (*Philosophical* 182). Dworkin, in turn, views communitarianism as a kind of paternalism on the part of the state. Some forms of paternalism are harmless, such as forcing citizens to wear seat belts, a form of coercion that most people would view as making their lives neutral or better. But this is not the only form that state paternalism can take, and Dworkin asks, instead of forcing people to do what they already think is good for them, “Is it proper for a state to try and make people’s lives better by forcing them to act in ways they think makes their lives worse?” (*Sovereign* 268).

This has to do with the communitarian view of assessing what makes people’s lives best—what fits with the state-endorsed definition of the good life—and then

compelling this to become realized. But Dworkin challenges this view by using the example of desires (“Liberal” 484). We have both volitional and critical desires. Volitional desires are those that, if we didn’t have them, the lack seemingly would not make our lives worse: If someone prefers orange juice, we would not think he was worse off if he instead happened to prefer coconut water. Critical desires are more substantial, like having a desire for friendship, where if someone didn’t have this desire we would think they were in some sense worse off than someone who does. This offers a persuasive argument for critical paternalism—that the state ought to find what makes life good, like friendship, and compel this to become realized. But Dworkin notes a flaw in the conception: If the citizen is forced to do what the state has good reason to believe is best for him, and yet he himself “never endorses the life he leads as superior to the life he would otherwise have led, then his life has not been improved” (“Liberal” 486)<sup>3</sup>.

Will Kymlicka suggests one of the reasons liberalism is necessary is because it allows citizens the opportunity to explore alternatives (185), a freedom in society whereby one may come to know what the good life is. If such a life was prescribed beforehand, no such discovery could exist; it would similarly remove the liberal freedom which allows for individual goals or conceptions of the good life to be revised. It would not be altogether inappropriate to compare the liberal interest of the state for its citizens to a parent’s regard for its children: Basic needs must be met so that individual flourishing is possible, but intellectual curiosity and self-discovery must be permitted. Children, and citizens, must be permitted to make mistakes—not to be abandoned or neglected, but given the space to grow. If events play out poorly, a child should

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<sup>3</sup> Will Kymlicka expresses a similar view when he says that “no life goes better by being led from the outside according to values the person doesn’t endorse” (183).

reasonably expect support from its parent, as a citizen should reasonably expect support from the state—but such support should not be absolute, ongoing, or permanent.

This argument against critical paternalism views communitarianism as coercive, while liberals want to preserve some degree of autonomy in the private realm. This does not suppose that those who wish to have less autonomy and greater communal influence should be prevented from doing so, but rather that the overall structure of society should be liberal; and if within that liberalism some people wish to live in a way that is consistent with communitarian values, they would be free to do so (Nagel, “Concealment” 22). Nagel considers those values to be “the ambition of collective self-realization” (“Concealment” 29), an understanding of the social order that has not only political, but cultural implications as well. Liberalism, by contrast, should see fit to stand back from the private realm and not adjudicate between private views. It should not make its goal the public disavowal of private expressions—of racism, sexism, or homophobia, for instance, however crude those expressions may be—and instead allow its public efforts to be focused on larger questions of “how people are required to treat each other, how social and economic institutions are to be arranged, and how public resources are to be used,” decisions that can presumably be made without demanding a uniformity of private views (Nagel, “Concealment” 30). When the state does encroach into areas of personal life and expression, we cannot avoid the state’s coercion except by returning, once again, to the liberal principle of universal and individual dignity that grants equal respect to individuals to determine for themselves the convictions that will be the basis for their life (Nagel, “Personal” 107). In this way, liberalism is both what is prior to, and an escape from, the suffocating influence of communitarianism.

Dworkin also critiques communitarianism from the sphere of personal identity. Where communitarians argue that a substantial source of the self comes from being embedded in a community, Dworkin counters by saying that having an identity or being a member of a social group “says nothing at all about the kind of relations I must or should have” with other members of my community (*Liberal* 488). Kwame Appiah makes a similar claim when he says that the very idea of “[d]emanding respect for people as blacks and as gays requires that there are some scripts that go with being an African-American or having same-sex desires” (162). But while we imagine that the mere fact someone is black or gay is not enough to predict the type of person they are, communitarianism would presume to tell them what is in fact most important about themselves, and that they could in effect fail to live up to their gayness or blackness.

As these liberal responses make clear, the communitarian critique of liberalism does not result in a nullity or void. The contemporary liberals respond harshly in defense of personal freedom and universal equality. But in my view the debate does not end here. If we move from the political aspects of individualism and collectivism to a more metaphysical approach, we may find that two of modern liberalism’s best defenders have in some sense tried to bridge their atomistic understanding of individual rights and freedoms (as in Kant) with a holistic account of mind and value (as in Hegel). And we may find it beneficial to recognize the form of liberalism can be filled in with the content of virtue, without necessarily threatening the moral autonomy required by liberalism.

### Part 3: The Possibility of Peace

One source of tension between the liberals and the Kantians on the one side and the Hegelians and the communitarians on the other has to do with the view that Hegel in



some way represents the beginning of a break into the continental tradition. Analytic philosophy of the 20th century in some sense sprung out of a reaction against Hegelianism, and so it seems inevitable that 20th century liberals working in the analytic tradition will be skeptical of Hegel (Schwarzenbach 539). Bernard Williams has expressed dissatisfaction with these terms, referring to the divide between continental and analytic as a "bizarre conflation of the methodological and the topographical, as though one classified cars into front-wheel drive and Japanese" (*Sense* 300). Williams' insight gets to the sort of peace between traditions that I aim to demonstrate would be desirable in this third portion of this essay.

William Harris said of Hegel's method (in 1881) that, "Hegel has treated again and again the system of Kant in the course of his works, praising its wonderful features and criticising its inconsistencies and its mechanical presumptions" (251). This seems to me the right approach, as something seems unfortunate when we see people dismiss Descartes because they are materialists, Plato because they are evolutionary biologists, or Aquinas because they do not believe in God. This sort of self-satisfied dismissal of a view we consider wrong can best be described by what Hegel calls the skeptical or negative moment. This kind of skepticism and rejection is valuable and necessary, but it cannot represent the whole of the matter. We must first recognize the reciprocal action between views—if we reject X in order to favor Y, the relation that X provides Y is important, even if we reject it—before proceeding to a moment of "raising up" in Hegel's sublation. We ought, as Hegel was able to do, to discern what is valuable in a given philosopher without rejecting him wholesale. This may lead us to ask why, after Harris' description of Hegel's method in 1881, it would be necessary to repeat this sort of

synthesis again. Despite Hegel's blending of Greek virtue with Kant's reason, the attacks continue, possibly because different combinations of solutions lead to different problems. Kierkegaard's response to Hegel shows that something is awry with an absolute systematizing that consumes everything that is—it doesn't do justice to either the meaning of faith or the plight of the individual, and in some cases, according to Kierkegaard, some things truly are either/or, not both/and (Evans 351).

For this reason it would not be fruitful to simply reject communitarianism as the regrettable sentimental desire to “become like one huge unhappy family” (Nagel, “Concealment” 11). Liberalism offers us the best hope for a sustainable society, as it offers a toleration of difference that its alternatives cannot provide—it trumps communitarianism in that when liberalism makes demands they are demands of toleration, not coercion. When communitarianism makes demands, it requires that individuals suppress their convictions in deference to the community or state—and there exists a marked difference in the weight of a demand when a liberal asks for toleration and a communitarian asks for belief<sup>4</sup>. If we are to combine liberalism and communitarianism, or individualism and collectivism, or Hegelianism and Kantianism, we must do it in a way that respects the things about either that seem to matter. An absolute political system must at once include different communities, viewpoints, and moral outlooks within it, while at the same time granting the degree of space necessary, where possible, to respect what gives those differences value.

Some philosophers have attempted to show why communitarians are wrong about Hegel, and that Hegel's conception of an individual's identification with the state can be

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<sup>4</sup> As Bernard Williams puts it, “the fanatic is always disappointed: what he wanted was acknowledgment, but all he can get is conformity” (*Philosophy* 129).

considered in such a way as to be tenable under Kantian liberalism (Kaufman 807)<sup>5</sup>.

Other philosophers have attempted to remind us that trying to fit Kant within Hegel risks distorting the features that makes Kant important (Sedgwick 45). We can read these as attempts to both preserve the core of what matters while at the same time synthesizing the two standpoints together.

The liberal critics of communitarianism have engaged in projects to respect difference in other ways. Nagel aligns himself with the Hegelian tradition that “rational intelligibility is at the root of the natural order” (*Mind* 17) while at the same time working as a political liberal. Ronald Dworkin has expressed the view that one may have a religious attitude without believing in God, and that the truly religious attitude is simply “that human life has objective meaning” and that people have the responsibility to live well (*Religion* 10). Elsewhere, like Hegel, he has suggested that law itself is a form of morality made objective<sup>6</sup>. Taken with his critiques of communitarianism, this commitment to the objective realm of value seems like one way for liberals to find common ground with particular communities of religious believers, in a way that may alleviate tensions encouraged by well-publicized atheist materialists such as Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, among others. Both Nagel and Dworkin, then, may plausibly be understood as political liberals making certain gestures that could help to bridge the gap between Kantianism/liberalism and Hegelianism/communitarianism metaphysically. Marx claimed in *Capital* to be reversing Hegelian dialectic, replacing the mystification of metaphysics with materialism (103). While we may have much to admire in Marx, this abandonment of metaphysics—and of the ideal realm of mind and value—

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<sup>5</sup> Kaufman refers to this as weak, rather than strong, identification (807).

<sup>6</sup> Dworkin crafts a “one-system picture of law and politics” where law is a branch of morality itself (407 *Justice*).

seems to me the abandoning of a moral anchor, the rejection of which leaves us victim to the contingencies of circumstance. The liberal retrieval of metaphysics is thus a necessary feature of the synthesis between traditions that I have argued for—and may have other, surprising consequences, such as the recognition that scientific inquiry, normally construed as the height of objectivity, itself may operate within an unspoken metaphysics, thus challenging the assumption that science can be the independent “last word” in all matters<sup>7</sup>.

The heart of the liberal position is that individuals are free moral agents, ends in themselves of equal intrinsic value. Depending on who is doing the construing, liberalism is sometimes misconstrued to mean that individuals should be free to do whatever they want—that it is empty, nihilistic, breeding anomie in its citizens—and that whatever results follow are just. The first claim is clearly wrong—even the most cursory glance at the ethical theories of the most prominent liberals will reveal a deep commitment to objective morality and scathing critiques of relativism or purely subjective value. But it is easy to see why the inextricable link of subjective and objective in Kantian morality is elusive, and why some people find it distanced or removed from the content of the world. And it is understandable that liberals who believe that unequal outcomes can be just—that my life is a reflection of my choices—may be considered overly formal, when taken in consideration with the role that luck plays in how events play out.

In this way it may be best for us to sketch a liberal position in which liberal neutrality on the part of the state (and Kantian morality on the part of individuals) forms the basic structure of society—a structure that, as I have said, if properly implemented would look

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<sup>7</sup> Scarfe points out the scientific community’s hostility to metaphysics can be traced back to Hume’s skepticism concerning causality (230).

drastically different than the liberal society in which we presently live<sup>8</sup>—but where questions of empiricism, virtue, and luck in outcome are not discounted.

Part of what this means is recognizing that the ideal ethical theory of liberalism that we cling to may not be most pragmatic in all circumstances. This shouldn't mean that we reject liberalism, rather that we allow alterations where they seem most pressing. I would like to end this discussion with a particularly instructive example of how we might bend liberal neutrality—one example where ideal morality can be addressed by seemingly counterintuitive practice—offered by Nagel on affirmative action.

It seems *prima facie* confusing for a liberal to reject affirmative action—we normally associate such programs with liberals if we associate them with anybody. But in accordance with liberal principles it must be rejected—if individuals are universally equal, then it is unethical to discriminate between individuals based on race, whether the discrimination is positive or negative. But we have in this instance two understandings of liberalism working simultaneously: Liberalism, in the ideal, must reject discrimination. But there is nothing inherently inconsistent about a liberal who recognizes that an ideal theory may not apply perfectly to an un-ideal world. Where historic or cultural oppression is the case, it seems plausible to in the un-ideal sphere permit something like affirmative action as a corrective, while holding that in the ideal world racial preference would be unjust (Nagel, “John” 84). This does not mean that we reject liberal principles as being overly formal or idealistic, and instead turn to whatever social arrangement can provide, in the moment, the broadest level of blanket equality. As I have argued, this would diminish the role of moral autonomy that individuals must have in order to fully

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<sup>8</sup> Not least of all, Kantian morality seems strongly resistant to unregulated market economies.

live in accordance with their conception of the good life<sup>9</sup>. Instead, we commit ourselves firmly to the principles of liberalism, knowing that in order to achieve them we must not reject the difference that we claim as equal worth.

My intention in this paper has been to reflect on, as I see them, the two most fundamental, and in some cases fundamentally opposed, conceptions of what it means to be progressive. I have argued in favor of a liberalism of the sort epitomized by Kant's morality—suggesting that its interlocutors have taken shape in the form of Hegel and his communitarian progeny. While I believe that liberalism provides the firmest foundation for the society necessary for moral autonomy, Hegel's dialectic can provide ways in which we can be skeptical in principle, but preserve where beneficial, the competing theories for a just society.

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<sup>9</sup> It would also simplify the distinctions between equal concern, equal opportunity, and equal outcome, all of which would need to be seriously contrasted with moral luck.

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