

Social Science as Hegel Saw It

§1 Hegel Unfolds Social Theory from the Concept of ‘Right’

It is Hegel's contention that Spirit arose out of Nature in the form of living organisms struggling to free themselves from natural determinacy, and Spirit is this relentless struggle to overcome all kinds of dependency, heteronomy and limitation on its free activity and development. In the phase of subjective spirit this went so far as the development of self-conscious and intelligent human activity. But within the domain of subjective spirit, that is to say, in the forms of activity characteristic of and constituting human individuals, there remain severe limitations on the quality and extent of the freedom which Spirit could attain. Only by creating social and political institutions could Spirit extend beyond the limited forms of life characterised by subjective spirit. This next phase of Spirit is called ‘objective spirit’.

On the foundation of objective spirit, the subjective spirit is able to objectify itself as free intellect in the pursuit of art, religion, philosophy and science without alien social or political constraints, and this is ‘absolute spirit’. But it is objective spirit as Hegel outlined it in *The Philosophy of Right* which is the topic here.

The *social*¹ form of Freedom is Right. The German, *Recht*, has much the same range of meanings as the English, ‘right’, but Hegel broadens the meaning of the word considerably. A whole range of juridical, sociological, moral and ethical concepts arise, as he sees it, out of the abstract concept of Right, and Hegel treats them all as *forms of Right*. Consequently, *The Philosophy of Right*, turns out to be not just a treatise on law, but also morality, civil society, the state and ‘world history’ – all those forms of ‘objective mind’ which Spirit produces and requires for its free development.

Thus, as the title implies, the subject matter of *The Philosophy of Right* is Right. But Right is an extremely concrete concept for which the entire treatise is required to elaborate. As with Hegel's other books, the *abstract* concept of Right is not deduced within *The Philosophy of Right*, but is rather given to it by Subjective Spirit, which arrived at the contradiction that Freedom could only

1 Strictly speaking, I should say “societal.” “Social relations” fall under Subjective Spirit, while “societal relations” fall under Objective Spirit. But “societal” is not a word which is widely used, so I will generally use “social” in its broader sense, inclusive of “societal,” and rely on the context.

be attained by means of social and political rights (some say 'recognition'), something which lay beyond the horizons of subjective spirit.

The *first* social form of Freedom is (private) property.

I have put 'private' in brackets because according to Hegel, property is inherently private and what could loosely be called 'public property' is not property at all. So in all that follows, 'property' is synonymous with 'private property'.

Further, even the abstract concept of Right exhibits a development from a phase which still falls short of the juridical relation of ownership up to more socially elaborate forms of property. Property as such is the key concept in the phase of the development of Right which Hegel calls 'Abstract Right'. So the first category of *The Philosophy of Right* is Abstract Right.

According to Hegel, "In this treatise we take for granted the scientific procedure of philosophy, which has been set forth in the philosophic Logic." (*PR* §2. ad.)

This procedure is to begin with one concept, here 'Abstract Right', and subject the concept to internal critique. 'Internal critique' means to test by logical enquiry whether the concept is Absolute, that is to say, whether the given concept of Right is able to secure a person's freedom absolutely, or whether it comes up against a limitation or internal contradiction which demands a new concept. In the absence of the spirit of human beings to overcome all limitations on their free activity, such a logical procedure would be an empty exercise, and indeed Right could not exist at all. But insofar as Spirit is, as Hegel believes, something real, and human activity is not simply a natural process driven by neurological processes and conditioned reflexes, then *The Philosophy of Right* is a valid approach to social science.

That the *Logic* sets out the procedure to be applied in *The Philosophy of Right* requires some caveats. (1) This does *not* imply that the *Science of Logic* is some kind of *model* for *The Philosophy of Right* or that we should expect a one-to-one equivalence between sections of the two books; (2) The forms of movement exhibited in *The Philosophy of Right* are distinct from those exhibited in the *Logic* or Hegel's other books; (3) Whereas the *Logic* is the 'pure essentialities' exhibited in the development of *all* formations of consciousness, *The Philosophy of Right* bears specifically upon those formations which foster the development of social forms Freedom treated in the book.

These issues will be treated in more detail later on.

§2 Right may not be True to its Concept

The concept of Right is Freedom in the societal domain. Right is a concrete concept, and for Right to be true to its concept requires millennia of many-sided