

## Hegel and Social Ethics (*Sittlichkeit*)

“Philosophy is its own time raised to the level of thought.” -- *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*

### Kant & the Categorical Imperative (Deontological Ethics)

*First Maxim:* “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

*Second Maxim:* “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means to an end.”

*Third Maxim:* “Therefore, every rational being must so act as if he were through his maxim always a legislating member in the universal kingdom of ends.”

Ethics cannot be based on the situational and conditional but on the universally good. Only those actions performed for the sake of duty, for the good-in-itself, can be said to be truly good. This is so regardless of the consequences.

### Hegel and the Right

1. “What is rational is real and what is real is rational.” Philosophy’s role is to apprehend the real, “what is,” because that is what is rational.
2. The right is found in the realm of *Geist* (spirit), that is the immaterial (i.e. cultural) aspects of human existence.
3. The human will is initially free but soon controlled by desires and impulses, which result in a state of caprice and antagonism.
4. The will’s right object is the universal good, while its rightful subject is self-consciousness and individual identity. The right enacted (true action) transcends the dialectic of the will’s object and subject by returning to true freedom.
5. The agent of action rightly intends when he or she knows the universal. Something is then right or wrong as the object is known to be worthy. This results in a duty towards one’s welfare and the welfare of others.
6. The ethical life is freedom realized in the objective world through self-consciousness and action, especially through the laws and institutions of the state.
7. Universal ethics are realized in the customs and the corporate mind of a people, family, and nation (*Sittlichkeit*).
8. The family is to be marked by love, especially in marriage’s monogamous unity.
9. The civil society is the actualization of the happiness of all. The private ends of individuals are mediated through the universal as actualized in the state.
10. The universal is made concrete in the various institutions of labor, capital, civil service, judicial courts, police, corporation, and the political state in its various manifestations,
11. World history is the history of Mind realizing itself in actual time. States, families, cultures, and individuals are all the unconscious manifestation of the World Mind developing.

12. History, then, is Idea clothing itself in historic events. The Germanic is the most fully developed expression of the Mind's Idea of Freedom.

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### **Kierkegaard's Chief Objections**

"I feel...at times...an enigmatic respect for Hegel; I learned much from him, and I know very well that I can still learn much more from him... His philosophical knowledge, his amazing learning...and everything else good than can be said of a philosopher I am willing to acknowledge as any disciple—willing to admire, learn from him."—Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*

We should keep in mind that *Fear and Trembling's* narrator, John the Silent, is not exactly the same as Kierkegaard himself, though it is not unreasonable to see the pseudonymous voice as giving expression to some of the Dane's own objections. Likewise, we should keep in mind that Kierkegaard is reacting to a specific formulation of Hegel as realized by certain Danish Hegelians.

- If Abraham is truly the father of faith, there must be something higher than *Sittlichkeit*.
- Hegelianism reduces God to the ethical and the cultural. God no longer transcends culture and simply becomes the highest, most developed expression of the good in a culture.
- Hegel's system helps supports Christendom's mistaken notion that someone born into Christianity is already a Christian, thus reducing faith again to nothing but the ethical and easily achievable.
- The individual in Hegel's thought is inevitable trapped in the cultural realization of the universal. The particular has no real value.
- God as the transcendent can communicate a revelation from outside the *Sittlichkeit* into the *Sittlichkeit*. Someone must be outside the System.
- Hegel's system ends up deifying the universal (and its expression in state power).
- Sin and repentance actually point to a transcendent reality beyond our socio-cultural definitions of the good. They speak of a relationship with the Absolute who transcends the *Sittlichkeit*.