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Community in Hegel’s Social Philosophy

Simón Lumsden

Abstract

In the Philosophy of Right Hegel argues that modern life has produced an individualised freedom that conflicts with the communal forms of life constitutive of Greek ethical life. This individualised freedom is fundamentally unsatisfactory, but it is in modernity seemingly resolved into a more adequate form of social freedom in the family, aspects of civil society, and ultimately the state. This article examines whether Hegel’s state can function as a community and by so doing satisfy the need for a substantial ethical life that runs through Hegel’s social thought. The article also examines why Hegel does not provide a detailed analysis of community, as a distinct sphere between the private and the public political sphere in the Philosophy of Right, and why it is not a key platform of his social freedom.

The distinction between society and community was formalized in the late nineteenth century by Ferdinand Tönnies. This distinction was also central to Heidegger, although with a very different politics, in the mid-twentieth century. Both these thinkers conceive community (Gemeinschaft) as a form of shared understanding and communal life which is grounded in a commitment to place. By contrast, society is primarily an instrumental form of social interaction ‘where everyone is out for himself alone and living in a state of tension with everyone else’ (2001: 52). Hegel shares with these figures an acute awareness that modern life has produced an individualized freedom that is incompatible with the communal shared projects that were, for example, at the heart of Greek ethical life.

In the twentieth century, interest in community emerges on a variety of fronts. Whatever the diverse origins that lead people, often with conflicting social and political agendas, to attempt to reconceive this notion, all are seeking to provide some kind of alternative to the fragmentation and isolation of modern society (see Sennett 1977). Hegel describes civil society, with its origins in the bourgeois market and the system of needs, as a sphere of particularity, that is, somewhere that individuals pursue private interests. While acknowledging many positive features in civil society, he argues that the individualized freedom that comes to flourish in the peculiarly modern sphere of civil society is limited.
Despite Hegel’s reservations about civil society, he does not seek to remedy it or challenge it by reviving a notion of community in the manner of Tönnies and Heidegger. Tönnies claims that the modern state cannot overcome atomisation and alienation and establish a genuinely shared form of life, since it primarily operates on a social contractarian model of moderating competing self-interests. For Hegel, the best prospects for overcoming the atomisation of individuals in civil society is a state that can cultivate in its citizens a regard for the universal such that individuals think and act in accordance with the universal, and are thereby able to transcend their particular allegiances and the self-interest cultivated by the competitive elements of civil society.

In this context this paper addresses the following two issues: firstly, it examines whether the state overcomes these problems by establishing a successful political community. Following Axel Honneth, I argue that Hegel’s state provides a limited model of political community, because it inadequately accounts for how we might be bound together in a participatory and communal form of life in and as the state. Secondly, Hegel was well aware of the loss of community and is in some sense nostalgic for it. He suggests the need for a shared form of life beyond the family, in which one can enjoy communal life outside the individualized and instrumentalized domain of civil society. However, the defining features of modernity (subjective freedom, self-determination, the critical transformation of norms and so on) mean that community cannot be a structure of right.¹ This was as true in the 1820s as it is in the early twenty-first century. Hegel is sensitive to the idea of community, but does not invoke some form of community to counter atomisation in the modern world. The state and civil society are the only structures that can respond to atomisation in a manner that is consistent with modern social freedom. Community might provide comfort and something to which we aspire to belong, but it cannot be a sphere of right or justice, since its exclusivity is at odds with subjective freedom and the universalist aspiration of the modern state. Overall I argue that Hegel’s thought addresses and negotiates these tensions around community and modernity, without resolving them satisfactorily—perhaps because no satisfactory resolution is really possible.

I. Substance, individuality and concrete freedom

In the Philosophy of Right, and in his lectures on history and philosophy from this period, Hegel describes two broad forms of life. The first is ‘the principle of Greek ethical life’ which he says is the ‘main thought’ of Plato’s Republic. Hegel characterizes it this way: ‘each individual subject acts, lives, and finds enjoyment only within this spirit and the subjective has its second, or spiritual, nature in a natural mode or as the custom and habit of what is substantial’.² The animating
feature of Greek ethical life is a type of organic unity in which the citizen unreflectively embodies the ethic of the city, such that she does not understand herself as an independent judge of those values. Shared forms of life have unquestioned priority over the lives of individuals. Who one is, is aligned immediately with the norms, values and customs of the community—Antigone and Creon are Hegel’s archetypal examples.

Plato’s Republic describes a highly structured and rigid social and political order, explicitly modelled on the harmony of part and whole in an organism (PR §185). The Republic captures the principle of Greek ethical life but also its limitation, since it allows no determinative role for subjective freedom or the self-reflective subject. This is corrected in the modern era (LNR 1995: §141). The ‘determination that stands over and against’ the ‘substantial’ model of ethical life is the ‘principle of subjective freedom’.

Against this substantial relationship of individuals to customs—is the individual’s subjective free will, the moral viewpoint that individuals [should] not perform their actions out of respect and reverence for the institutions of state or fatherland, but that they should reach their own decisions in keeping with the moral conviction and should determine their actions according to their own decision and conscience. (LHP: II 219–220/V, 52)

The dualism of subjective freedom and substantial ethical life establishes an opposition that Hegel confronts in his social and political philosophy. Hegel does not react against the atomistic tendency of the modern age in his account of ethical life by reclaiming an unreconstructed Greek ethical life. The subjective freedoms that the market economy affords are central to modern ethical life and there is no retreat from this.

For Hegel, civil society (bürgerliche Gesellschaft) is best conceived as an aggregate of individuals pursuing their specific needs. Civil society is characterized by heightened awareness of one’s individuality and it develops an objective order—markets and forms of collective organization—in which that individuality flourishes. Civil society provides a plethora of social roles and duties that are largely the product of complex social and economic relations. The corporations and forms of association that represent collective yet particular interests denote, however, an incipient movement away from the heightened particularity of modern subjects, since they are collective forms of interest. The representative organizations of civil society are, though, limited forms of communal life, since they are focused on a common interest that is largely reflective of the market and the interests of property-owning classes. In these representative organizations, the singularity of abstract persons depicted in ‘Abstract Right’ becomes particular. Without becoming a member of one of the...
institutions of civil society, within which one can participate in the commercial life of society, the subject remains an abstract universal, simply a private person with rights.

The paradox of the corporations is that they provide the individual with a sphere of collective life but also represent collective particular interests. Members recognize that their particular ends—their needs and their attempts to realize them—are ordered into something communal (LNR §170). Through participation in the commercial life of the city, individuals recognize others’ interests and modify their desires in the interests of an acknowledged greater whole, or at least in relation to those they are selling or working with. The various representative organizations of civil society cultivate the civic responsibilities that pertain to their internal organization and how they should conduct themselves with other groups in civil society (this is why Hegel locates the administration of justice in civil society). That is, for all the self-interest of civil society, the pursuit of a common end is still a motivating concern (see PR §254–55, LNR §121).

While corporations and estates represent particular interests, they nevertheless provide the condition for a transition from the self-interested individualism that flourishes in the market economy towards a more social form of existence, and are the necessary path to the establishment of the collective life of the state. The fragmentation of society is in part overhauled by the collective life that civil society organizations both require and enable. The communal life of corporations and estates involves the development of roles and responsibilities within these organizations. This, coupled with the care these institutions take for the welfare of their members, ensures that

[the] member of a corporation has no need to demonstrate … the fact that he is somebody—by any further external evidence [such as income]. In this way, it is also recognised that he belongs to a whole [Ganzen] which is itself a member of society in general, and that he has an interest in, and endeavours to promote, the less selfish end of this whole. (PR §253)

The corporations are structured to provide individuals with a sense of self-worth independent of the vicissitudes of the market economy. They offer stability and security in the radically unstable environment of the system of needs. In this role they are largely continuous with various traditional institutions that predate the market economy, including the corporations and the estates themselves, in part established to protect their members from the worst effects of unpredictable disasters that can befall a person. Being part of a whole and seeing one’s worth and dignity bestowed by one’s place in that whole are central to the transition to the state. The important element in acknowledging the state as a rational and essential feature of freedom is that the members of the corporations understand that there
is a wide variety of views and organizations in civil society. The status and security of any single organization is only possible because of the laws and institutions of the state. Individuals become aware that their ‘isolated trade’ has ‘an ethical status’ (PR §255) only because of the whole that allows these organizations to operate. That whole includes both the state and the socio-economic sphere that provides the opportunity to pursue a course of employment (PR §183).

Human beings can only realize themselves in a social whole (as family, estates, corporations and the state) and through social roles, status, meaningfully rewarded labour, and so on. Hegel focuses on the emerging modern forms of social organization of civil society. The transition from a feudal economy, the collapse of the guild system, the Napoleonic code—all well-known forces that led to the collapse of traditional communal life—are marginally referred to in the Philosophy of Right. History’s self-correcting logic means there can be no return to pre-modern communities; the inexorable rise of rights and autonomous subjectivity has made their resurgence in the West impossible (see, e.g., Neuhouser 2000: 223; Pippin 2008). Nevertheless, the opening discussion of ethical life begins a correction of the subjectivism of morality by showing the necessity of the relation of the subject to the ethical sphere. It resituates the subject in relation to the whole.

Hegel’s discussions of Socrates attribute to him the origin of moral reflection, due to Athenian culture to provide customs that the individual can immediately recognize as good. While the Philosophy of Right’s presentation of ethical life is far more reflective and rational than Antigone’s and Creon’s embodiment of customary law, nevertheless Hegel preserves key elements of the ‘substantiality’ of Greek ethical life. Freedom of the moral will requires culture, institutions and the state to avoid a potential disjuncture between the substantive (ethical life) and moral reflection, the division described at the end of ‘Morality’.

Hegel’s appeal to organicism as the model of ethical life does not indicate a demand for a mirroring of a natural order for the political state. There is a naturalistic sentiment at play in ethical life, on which his use of the model of an organism to describe the relation of the individual to the institutions of ethical life draws. But interpreting the organicism of ethical life as a literal model for how to see the relation of individual to the state would undercut the idea of the state and civil society as historical developments which mark a collective achievement of self-determining subjects. Hegel’s overwhelming description of the journey of spirit—as self-producing—affirms, in some sense, spirit’s independence from nature. This cannot be undermined by his appeal to the metaphor of an organism (Pippin 2008: 195). There are not just two polarized alternatives for interpreting ethical life: either a self-determined freedom completely separate from nature or individuals as accidents of a social or state substance. What spirit creates is a ‘second spiritual nature’. Unlike ancient Athens, individuals in modern ethical life are conscious that the institutions of objective spirit have shaped who they are.
and in turn that they have shaped them. There is an identification with the whole which is felt, but it is not an unreflective immersion in the whole as in Greek ethical life.

The opening discussion of ethical life describes concrete freedom, that is, being with oneself in otherness. This notion, in its initial formulation in PR §7, in ethical life (PR §144–48; §150–51), and in later descriptions of the state, discussed below, describe the relation of the individual to ethical laws as self-awareness or self-feeling (Selbstgefühl), ‘actual living principle’ (Lebendigkeit), habit, second nature and being with oneself (bei sich). These notions, explicitly tied to the description of concrete freedom, continue throughout the third part of the book, and all evoke an important naturalistic element: ethical laws and institutions are embodied expressions of human freedom. The way Hegel describes the ethical as second nature (PR §150–51) depicts a type of embodied normativity by which norms get their force not simply through explicit rational commitments but through the complex processes by which culture transcribes its customs onto individual such that their self-awareness (Selbstgefühl) is mediated through them. I cannot explore the details here beyond the broad claim that ethical life must be conceived as a relation of the individual to the whole such that the connection to that whole is grounded in the full depth of human emotional, affective and intellectual life.

‘Ethical substantiality’ is Hegel’s language to capture the communality of ethical life. Throughout the discussion of family, civil society and the state, Hegel makes numerous references to community. Community is not something Hegel theorizes extensively in the Philosophy of Right, although it is something he aligns with these three spheres. While not a term that Hegel examines with his usual scientific precision, community is still a notion central to the substantiality of ethical life. Hegel employs an array of concepts to express the notion of community in its various guises in his objective spirit. The family is an ethical community based on love, civil society is an ethical community based on the organizations of the system of needs and the state is an ethical community based on the universal. Ethical life describes the institutional structures of the economy, the architecture of the state and the formal structure of the family. These structural descriptions do not capture how community is a form of life. The notion of concrete freedom which Hegel uses to capture the relation of the individual to the ethical law is not simply a logical one, individuals are at home with themselves in the otherness of family, civil society, and state requires love, complex social roles with which people identify, a feeling that the corporation is like a ‘second family’, and patriotism. The concrete freedom described in ethical life involves a disposition of the individual towards its institutions that has strong affective and emotional resonance which explicitly links to second nature (PR §287; see Pelczynski 1984).
Family, corporations and the state broadly correspond to established ways of considering community in political theory. Community is by its nature an ethereal and vague notion that can describe the family or the state. Andrew Mason, in one of the few sustained works on the topic, describes four essential attributes of community (all of which cohere with Hegel’s account of community in the lectures on natural right from 1817–19, esp. LNR §121, §141): ‘sharing values, a way of life, identifying with a group and its practices, and recognizing each other as members of community’ (Mason 2000: 26). I would add another criterion: that a communal way of life and one’s commitments to it must be able to be inhabited—there must be material aspect of one’s culture in which those values can be lived. The sensibility of belonging that is so important to concrete freedom implicitly draws on these aspects of community. I will argue in Section II that the state, to overcome the atomism of civil society, seeks to establish a form of political community, but fails to make a subject at home; it fails as a political community, because it is not an adequate expression of concrete freedom.

A wider normative notion of community is also important for understanding how successfully Hegel’s account of the state is able to reconcile individual and whole. This is captured in Tönnies’s account of community, a form of communal life that exists in parallel to civil society. Tönnies conceives it as an amalgam of physical location, customs that bind individuals to one another, and comradeship. It is a woolly notion but one that remains potent even in contemporary politics. Hegel appeals to this normative idea of community directly in various passages in his objective spirit, but he cannot make it a structure of right because it does not correspond to the communities he describes as family, corporation/estate and the state. It is a problematic domain, but one that lives on into the present, testimony to the inability of the state to provide a satisfactory form of communal life.

II. The state as political community

Hegel’s account of the state shuns both the forced allegiance of nationalism and the Lockean notion of the state as adjudicator of conflicting self-interests. The state has a unique role in developing the consciousness of the need for universality. The state develops a narrative about universality that is central to overcoming the particularity of civil society, and provides the material conditions for securing and advancing civil society (as we will see, this is an essential element of patriotism). Hegel gives duty a specific role in fostering the universal interests of the state. Hegel’s is not an abstract duty devoid of interest. There are no universals in the sphere of objective spirit without interests. Hegel remarks: ‘laws and principles are not immediately alive … the activity that puts them
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into operation is that of human needs, drives, inclinations, and passions’ (LPWH 91/158–59).

The unifying role of the modern state could not establish a new Greek ethical life in which individual will is unreflectively aligned with the will of the state. The modern state has to acknowledge the rights, self-awareness and rationality of individuals; these historical achievements cannot be revoked (PR §185). Individual duties towards the state are successful only if they feed back to the particular: ‘the individual, whose duties give him the status of a subject, finds that in fulfilling his duties as a citizen, he gains protection for his person and property, consideration for his particular welfare’ (PR §261R, my emphasis; cf. PR §264, LNR §132R). The citizen’s duties to the state are dependent on the state ensuring the vitality and security that her membership of a corporation allows. Patriotism, we will see, follows a similar pattern; its consolidation of the interests of the state is contingent on the state protecting and enhancing the interests of institutions of civil society.

Patriotism extends the sense of the individual belonging to a whole which emerges with the corporations. In patriotism the particularity and arbitrariness of individuals’ interests (and the corporations themselves) is overcome in the recognition that ‘[a]n individual] labours for the community [Allgemeinheit]’ (LNR §132R). The individual as member of a corporation becomes increasingly aware of her contribution to the whole and that the whole provides the structure in which her self-realization is possible. This is why Hegel describes the corporations as ‘assuming the role of a second family for its members’ (PR §253). In patriotism Hegel recognizes the need to see the state as a form of political community, that is, a universal sphere where we can be at home with ourselves in the institutions of the state. He makes explicit appeal to patriotism as the means by which political community is cultivated.

The distinctiveness of Hegel’s account of patriotism comes to the fore in contrast to Fichte’s approach in Addresses to the German Nation, which acknowledges that the atomistic nature of modern life and the nation state are limited in their ability to develop community.11 The state he describes in this work is a largely instrumental institution that facilitates the satisfaction of human needs. It is not a sphere of freedom other than in the Lockean sense: a sphere that guarantees individuals ‘live peacefully side by side’ and an ‘efficient means for realizing arbitrarily posited [willkürlich] ends’ (Fichte 2008: 106). Fichte’s state, in the language of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, is a sphere that administers the system of needs, an oversight authority that adjudicates contracts in society. Conceived this way the state precludes itself from having any higher or universal purpose; it cannot be an expression of freedom but only a guarantee of social freedoms. Fichte remedies this by introducing a notion of ‘love of fatherland’, which he contrasts with a ‘spirit of calm civic love for the constitution and laws’. 13

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Love of fatherland is not a rational affirmation of the individual’s relationship to the state but instead ‘the blazing flame of the higher love of fatherland … embraces the nation as the vesture of the eternal, for whom the noble man joyfully sacrifices himself and the ignoble’ (Fichte 2008: 107).

Hegel’s notion of patriotism is not Fichte’s love of the fatherland. It has a more specific and modern meaning. The patriotism he describes in the Philosophy of Right is primarily a commitment and willingness to participate in the institutional life of the modern state. Patriotism is described as the political disposition (Gesinnung)

of trust …, or the consciousness that my substantial and particular interest is preserved and contained in the interest and end of another (in this case, the state) and in the latter’s relation to me as an individual (Einzelnem). As a result, this other immediately ceases to be another for me, and in my consciousness of this, I am free. (PR §268, my emphasis)

Hegelian patriotism is not a one-way street in which one’s allegiance to the state dissolves one’s autonomy into the monolithic interests of the nation-state. As this passage makes clear, the state recognizes and cultivates the individual’s capacity for self-determination. Patriotism requires the state’s acknowledgement of the rationality and legitimacy of all the structures of right that precede its description in the Philosophy of Right. Patriotism, far from being an emotive identification with the state, is based on the rationality of the state, because rights, morality, and the institutions of civil society are understood to be necessary and determinate features of it. Patriotism describes our universal life, our investment in the institutions of the state— independent national broadcasters, public health care, public education, parliament, the judiciary, statutory authorities, etc.—and the way we concretely consider these elements to be expressions of our freedom.

In the last sentence of the passage above from §268, Hegel aligns patriotism with being-at-home with ourselves in otherness; this is his notion of concrete freedom. In this context it describes a ‘disposition to see ourselves in the rational institutions of the state: our interests are ‘preserved’ in the state’s institutions. For Hegel the family and the institutions of civil society are spheres in which we have concrete, embodied attachments, the family being the most immediate of these. The ethical import of these spheres, as well as of morality and abstract right, is preserved in the state. This is important to correct the excesses of Rousseau’s general will, which detached humans from these ‘lesser spheres’ to achieve the ends of the state.

While Hegel’s state is clearly at the top of the hierarchy, its own strength is dependent upon augmenting the attachment of individuals to the institutions of civil society and ensuring the diversity of those institutions. Ultimately the
‘political disposition’ is dependent less on respect for the universality of the state and more on allowing the institutions of civil society to flourish. One supports the state because it allows the individual to have honour and worth by virtue of her place in an organization:

the spirit of the corporation, which arises when the particular spheres gain legal recognition, is now at the same time inwardly transformed into the spirit of the state, because it finds in the state the means of sustaining its particular ends. This is the secret of the patriotism of the citizens … for it is the state which supports their particular spheres. (PR §289R, my emphasis)

By contrast in earlier passages on patriotism Hegel presents it as ‘that disposition [Gesinnung] which, in the normal conditions and circumstances of life, habitually knows that the community [Gemeinwesen] is the substantial basis and end’ (PR §268R).¹⁴ This passage, its addition and the way he describes the state in the body of the paragraph quoted above, require us to understand the state as a community. Patriotism has its basis in the political community of the state.

These two claims are not contradictory. Patriotism can involve both aspects: the state as a political community, and a state that allows the particularity of civil society to thrive. Hegel provides considerable detail on how the particularity of diverse interests in society should be conserved and cultivated by the state, which is a necessary condition for maintaining the state’s ongoing legitimacy and authority.

France lacks corporations and communal associations [Kommunen]—that is, circles in which particular and universal interests come together. … The proper strength of states resides in their internal communities [Gemeinden]. In these, the executive encounters legitimate interests which it must respect. (PR §290Z)

He implores the executive to ‘encourage such interests’, because the whole will only be preserved when these particular interests are cultivated. If individuals are just a mass of ‘scattered atoms’, then the state’s power will not be legitimate and the state will become weak or tyrannical. Unless there are concerted and organized forces—‘circles within circles’ that can coherently and legitimately represent diverse interests—the state will be unable to function adequately, because those interests will not be understood by the state and will not be challenged or responded to in the appropriate way.

Fichte, as we briefly saw, in Addresses to the German Nation attends to the tension between a state modelled on the administration of the system of needs and the necessity for a communal life with a restricted and authoritarian account of patriotism. Hegel’s approach to overcoming the loss of communal life that is
caused by the individualizing tendencies of the market economy is quite different. He attempts to correct the self-interest and fragmentation of civil society by establishing the state as a form of political community. While the state has some limited structures for collective participation, its common purpose is primarily constituted through an appreciation of the universal.

But it is the state that first supplies a content that not only lends itself to the prose of history but also hopes to produce it. Instead of the merely subjective dictates of the ruler, which may suffice for the needs of the moment, a community [Gemeinwesen] in the process of coalescing and raising itself up to the position of a state requires commandments and laws, general and universally valid directives. It thereby created a discourse [of its own development], and an interest in intelligible, inwardly determinate, and—in their results—enduring deeds and events. (LPWH 115–16/193; my emphasis)

Only in the state is one in a position to articulate the universal in a manner that allows transcendence of the particularity of corporations and estates, but also of natural inclinations, one's ethnicity, religion and so on. The salient issue is that the modern state is the historical development that is in the best position of any institution in human history to cultivate in its citizens knowledge of the universal, such that citizens see their interest and freedom in the state and in willing the universal.

The emergence of the modern state involves a historical claim about the progress of reason: it provides a unique situation in which subjects can recognize reasons as authoritative (rational) only when they issue from universals, not particularity (LPWH 116/193, 99/169). Consciousness of the universal provides the conditions under which people can hold each other to account on the basis of principles rather than inclinations or 'subjective dictates’. The state cultivates a universal perspective that positively transforms the particularized freedom of civil society and the feeling-based communal life of the family, providing subjects with a perspective by which they can make judgments on the basis of reasons and the good of the whole rather than individual interests. Modern individuals direct ‘their will to a universal end and act in conscious awareness of this end’ (PR §260).

Whereas Fichte in Addresses to the German Nation conceives the state as a mediator of potentially conflicting interests, Hegel presents the state as a distinct sphere by which human self-understanding is transformed. Hegel's dissatisfaction with the liberal opposition between state and civil society leads him to see the seeds of the collective life of the modern state emerging immanently from civil society. The state is an extension of the social freedom of civil society, not a
constraint on it. The state he proposes does not, as per Locke’s social contract theory, stand over and against the citizens adjudicating the only genuine sphere of freedom—society—but is instead objective freedom.

The state develops an essential component of how we should understand ourselves as free.

The state is the actuality of concrete freedom. But concrete freedom requires that personal individuality (*Einzelnheit*) and its particular interests should reach their full development and gain recognition of the right for itself (within the system of the family and of civil society), and also that they should, on the one hand, pass over of their own accord into the interest of the universal, and on the other, knowingly and willingly acknowledge this universal interest even as their own substantial spirit and actively pursue it as their ultimate end. (*PR §260*)

It is hard to find a stronger statement that the substantial strain at play in Greek ethical life lives on in a modified form, as an expression of concrete freedom. That Hegel aligns substantiality here with concrete freedom, being-at-home with oneself in otherness, is important, since it is a conscious and felt experience of self-limiting in another—not the accident of a property. Hegel describes the state as a form of public life ‘[w]here life in and for the universal is the aim, where substantive life has determinate existence, and where the individual exists for universal life as a public person, in other words is a citizen [Citoyen]’ (*LNR §72*, my emphasis; see also *LNR §89*). This citizen–subject and her lived self-conscious relation to the state is a corrective to the conflicting self-interests of civil society.

The state, to overcome the fragmentation of civil society, has to establish some sense of a substantial communal life beyond knowing and willing the universal. The development of the modern state required the creation of a new loyalty, one that deposed the various traditional forms of community. The citizen of the state had to be made loyal to it in a very different way to the immediacy that marked traditional communities. What is distinctive about the modern era, for Hegel, is that that loyalty can be cultivated in the modern state because the citizen ‘knows the state as their substance’ (*PR §289R*), rather than by a felt sense of belonging to an immediate unity which did not require explicit commitments or knowledge to engender obligations. The state cultivates this in the modern era, as we have seen, by supporting the diversity of institutions of civil society as a form of ethical life, insofar as it establishes a universal standpoint—respect for the common good and a perspective that transcends particularity. The need to know and will the universal emerges from the limits of civil society and is cultivated by the state.
Hegel says comparatively little in his various versions of objective spirit about what precisely this public person, the citizen who exists for the universal, necessitates. The state as an expression of ethical life requires more than a knowledge of the universal or a new form of self-understanding; it also requires pathways by which a shape of life can be a concrete form of existence with others, in and as a state community. The way Hegel conceives the state restricts its capacity to be a shared and participatory form of national life. Being a citizen is a form of ‘state’ life, but it does not represent a substantial world in which we are co-proprietors of or co-participants in the state. Hegel does not develop structures of ‘state life’ beyond abstract commitments and a limited participation in the affairs of the state through the vocational- and class-based estates. The concrete structures in which citizens live their social freedom are only fully articulated in civil society, and as we have briefly seen in the previous section, those organizations are limited forms of community because they are developed on the self-interest of the system of needs.

Axel Honneth has argued that Hegel’s state is incapable of providing an account of political community with genuinely ‘public freedom’ because it is ultimately ‘an authoritarian liberalism that grants individuals all the traditional basic rights but no chance to make a political contribution to structuring their common life’. Honneth sees competing strands in Hegel’s text, between the historical diagnosis of the emergence of individual freedom and an affirmation of a certain institutional structure, most cogently formulated in the state, in which individuals ‘attain self-realization by means of communal, “Universal” activities’ (Honneth 2010: 78). Honneth has a number of justifiable concerns about the absence of a ‘political public’, by which he means that there is limited opportunity for direct involvement of the populace in the state, other than through representative corporations and the archaic structure of the estates, as well as the nebulous role of public opinion. Ultimately, Honneth argues that there is a disjunction between the communal ends of the universal and self-determining subjects because there is no ‘space for the “citizens” to get together for discussions about the nature of the universal purposes’ (Honneth 2010: 79). The capacity of self-determining agents to contribute to the determination of the universal or the common good is indirect and severely constrained.

The estates represent the only other sphere of involvement in the state that might form the basis for a participatory form of life but they are, in the context of the Philosophy of Right, anachronistic. The political role of the estates is that they mediate between state and the particular interests of society at large; they allow the state to gauge and respond to the various interests in society. At the political level the first estate is structured to represent primarily the elite interests of large-scale inherited rural wealth. The second estate represents the successful and prosperous trading class. The estates are supposed to be a ‘mediating organ’
through which ‘the state enters into the subjective consciousness of the people’, and the people begins to participate in the state (PR §301Z). This mediating function is fundamentally limited, because the estates represent particular interests that are either tied to vocation or rigid agrarian class structures.

Hegel correctly sees modernity as producing fragmentation, which as we have seen, is remedied in the limited communal life of the corporations, as well as through patriotism and duty. The state is the highest and the necessary condition for human freedom. With regard to the development of a consciousness of the universal, we can understand this. The way the text unfolds is, as we have seen, that concrete freedom culminates in the state. This is the being at–home–in–otherness in which we are also recognized by the state. The way the state cultivates the diversity of civil society institutions meets some of this demand. But how we are at home in Hegel’s state when, as Honneth describes, its reciprocal structures are so thinly drawn is difficult to see. How are we bound together as the state without genuinely collective structures to which all citizens could contribute? The state—even with its executive capacity to promote common ends and patriotism—does not provide us with a communal life at the level of the universal. Our commitments to universals such as the rule of law do not make a political community (LNR §137R). The state as political community cannot exist as an abstract universal. ‘The ethical is not abstract like the good, but is intensely actual’ (PR §156Z). The state, to be ‘my own purpose’, requires that I have an interest in it; it must be lived in some form, and that needs concrete structures in which that interest can exist and thrive. Patriotism, military service, jury duty and other statutory expressions of participation in the affairs of the state are very limited forms in which that interest can be satisfied. Recognizing the state and our relationship to it as essential to the development of a good life in which the rule of law and the cultivation of the interests of the collective good is foremost in the judgment and actions of individuals is central to Hegel’s vision of the freedom of the modern subject. But that we see the universal features of the state as central to our identity as self-determining agents does not make it a form of communal life.

Honneth’s argument is that ethical life is perhaps not quite as rational as it could be with regard to the role that self-determining agents play in their participation in the ‘political public’. This challenges Pippin’s claim that Hegel’s state is the structurally organized ‘form appropriate to self-legislating, rational finite beings’ (Pippin 2008: 260). One could argue with qualification that Hegel’s state has the potential to be adequate to the modern age and modern subjects, as both Pippin and Honneth conceive it, if the ethical life of the state developed appropriate participatory structures. The issue that remains unresolved is how well Hegel can preserve the substantiality of Greek ethical life in a liberal political setting. The emergence of individual freedom, and the structuring of the institutions and social roles of civil society around predominantly economic
concerns, require that the state be the only possible sphere in which our communal interest can be lived as social freedom without reversion to particularity (PR §121). This is the modern reality Hegel is trying to grasp. Hegel’s social and political philosophy, after all, is not setting out to resolve this tension but to comprehend why freedom must be considered as taking the form it does as ethical life. Nevertheless, that the state does not satisfy completely the idea of concrete freedom marks an internal tension that Hegel cannot resolve in the *Philosophy of Right*.

III. A modern community?

A possible response to the fragmentation and atomism of civil society is to see them as irresolvable features of modernity. Modernity is incompatible with genuine communal belonging and the only remedy is an alternative consideration of collective life. Heidegger argues that the individual cannot be at home in modernity because civil society and the rise of instrumental rationality have made us homeless. One can see in much of Heidegger’s writing an attempt to contest society with a revised notion of community—tied to place, earth and a *völkisch* collective life. This idea of community is normative; it shares much with Tönnies’s view of community, in that it strives to capture a domain of ethical life that is a parallel form of communal life to civil society, but which is far superior because it is devoid of the instrumentalizing that characterizes society. In this sense it is a competitor to civil society as a form of ethical life.

Hegel had serious concerns that the growing importance of civil society had caused the erosion of other forms of communal life. He lamented that in the increasingly instrumentalized environment of modern life, communal forms of association and vocation were being abandoned and individuals were increasingly finding satisfaction in personal interests.

> Previously enjoyment lay in what was communal (*Gemeinsamen*) and people did not amuse themselves for themselves but in the community (*Allgemeinen*). Now this spirit is undermined, so that people are ashamed of their class, are unwilling to be seen as members of it, *take pride in themselves alone*. (LNR §121R; my emphasis)

The fundamental connectedness to others as participants in a communal project is, with the emergence of civil society, displaced. This passage shows that Hegel is aware of important features of pre-modern forms of communal life, such as collective forms of enjoyment and collective understanding. In this Hegel anticipates the discussion of the distinction between community and society in
Tönnies’s iconic work on this subject. Despite the clear appreciation of the distinctiveness and importance of community that such passages exemplify, such attributes of communal life are not recoverable in civil society (see Sennett 1977: ch. 13).

While Hegel clearly laments this loss, his social and political philosophy is not concerned to rehabilitate or refashion a notion of community to meet this need; it is rather redeemed only at the level of the state. Hegel’s project is of a very different order to Heidegger’s; it does not seek to reclaim a form of communal life that competes with civil society and contests the modern age. Whatever ambivalence Hegel might have towards modernity, the emergence of the modern family, civil society and the state has created a new form of human sociality which requires that human freedom be mediated through and embodied only in these institutions.

The transition from ‘Morality’ to ‘Ethical Life’ establishes fundamentally social, objective structures of right that correct the highly individualized conviction of morality. The Philosophy of Right develops a distinct model of freedom, a social freedom, in which subjects identify with, are at home in (bei-sich-sein), and participate in the three key institutions of ethical life (family, civil society, state). Ethical life is intended to capture the interplay between these three objective elements of right and the way in which these spheres together form a social realm that structures the subject’s self-awareness (Selbstgefühl). In Sittlichkeit the institutions of state and civil society are not constraints on freedom, but through the processes of cultural formation (Bildung) they come to be understood as necessary embodiments of a new type of socialized human freedom that Hegel describes as objective freedom. Frederick Neuhouser puts this succinctly: ‘social freedom consists in certain ways of belonging to and participating in the three principal institutions of modernity’ (Neuhouser 2011: 290, my emphasis). That we should see our freedom embodied in these institutions is an achievement of the modern age. If the notion of a self-determining subject is the core idea of modernity, what comes to be developed are the objective structures in which such a subject can be at home with herself. Just why these institutions are the necessary expressions of this freedom is what the Philosophy of Right develops.

Hegel, as we have already seen, acknowledges forms of communal life other than those organizations associated with the system of needs and the estates of civil society:

the state is essentially an organization whose members constitute circles in their own right, and no moment within it should appear as an unorganised crowd. ... The idea (Vorstellung) that those communities (Gemeinwesen) which are
already present in the circles referred to above can be split up into a collection of individuals … leaves political life hanging, so to speak, in the air; for its basis is then merely the abstract individuality of arbitrary will and opinion. (PR §303Z)

This passage is concerned with a potential pathology for the state if civil society is fractured into a multiplicity of individuals and disconnected self-interested organizations. Hegel thought widespread individual participation in the selection and running of government would lead to state rule based on the mass of subjective opinions. The effective functioning and the legitimacy of the state requires not an aggregate of individual views, but communities—‘circles in their right’—that are able to represent their diverse interests through coherent organizations.

While the distinction between community and society is not codified until later in the nineteenth century, it is clear that Hegel is acutely aware of models of community that are not structured around the private interests of the market or the class interests of the agrarian estates. Hegel’s stress on diverse community representation for the proper functioning of the state provides scope for the recognition and importance of forms of communal life other than the corporations and the estates (PR §270). These communities represented a potential model for a non-atomized sphere of sociality to which Hegel does not appeal. It might seem surprising that he does not incorporate into civil society established communities, especially those that were not structured around property, economic performance and social roles that reflected primarily only the demands of the market economy. There are diverse and numerous references to community throughout the Philosophy of Right and his earlier lectures on natural right but he does not examine the nature and diversity of these communities in a sustained way, except insofar as they align with the corporations or the estates. The reasons for this are twofold.

Firstly, as we saw above, the atomisation that the market economy produces is ameliorated with the emergence of the institutions of civil society and the roles they allow its members to occupy. Despite the way these organizations cultivate collective interests and thereby temper the self-interest that is characteristic of society, nevertheless ‘the natural and arbitrary particularity … of the state of nature’ is not entirely overcome in civil society (PR §200R). The origins of the corporations in the private interests of individuals means that the interests that those organizations serve cannot be equated with the good of the whole, although, as we have seen, the corporations prepare individuals for understanding that their interests may conflict with the others (see James 2013: 187–88). The only prospect for overcoming this is the ordering potential and power of the state, not a reversion to a model of communal life that was historically antecedent to civil society.
Secondly, while Hegel refers to this diversity of communal interests and appears to assume it without elaborating its origins or mapping that diversity, communities have no role in civil society unless they are identified by the state as institutions of civil society: ‘community can exist in civil society only if it is legally constituted and recognised’ (PR §253R). This passage recognizes the important social function of community, yet Hegel restricts the participation of communities in civil society to those that serve the interest of the whole. To this end they are required to have their actions overseen by the state. Within the tripartite social structure of freedom, described above, communities must become corporations if they are not to serve exclusively particular interests. ‘In our modern states, the citizens have only a limited share in the universal business of the state; but it is necessary to provide ethical man with a universal activity in addition to his private end. This … can be found in the corporation’ (PR §255Z). Corporations are distinguished from guilds because they are not self-serving. They have an ‘ethical status’ or a universal purpose because they are ultimately in the service of a genuinely common end beyond the immediate benefit of the corporation for its members. Corporations as institutions within civil society are aware that their authority comes in part from the state, by virtue of how they mediate between their own interests and the state’s; that is, they contribute to the state’s discernment of a universal purpose.

Co-existing with the self-interested organization of the system of needs are important elements of communal life. In Community and Civil Society Tönnies states that ‘the power of community, even in decline, is maintained even into the era of society and remains the true reality of social life’ (2001: 258). These elements of communal life allow individuals to be bound to one another on the basis of relationships that represent far more diverse forms of communal identification and participation than the fairly narrow and hierarchical structures of the estates and the corporations, tied as they are to the contractual model of the market.

Community is a notoriously difficult notion to define. It is much easier to say what it is not than what it is. The notion of community that Tönnies is trying to capture is a shared form of life that exists in parallel with civil society: a sphere of complex social relationships that occurs in the sphere between family and state. A form of human togetherness that is neither society nor the nation state is, in modern life, something that is difficult to conceive in a way that is compatible with the modern world. The modern quest for community may be a modern reaction to the atomisation of civil society, representing a desire for a realm of values or social relationships that is outside the sphere of social roles defined by work, instrumental rationality and the market. It is an admittedly vague though evocative concept; a domain in which we are accepted without having to
distinguish oneself. It is built on a shared understanding that is largely tacit, a unity that does not require formal contractual agreement, a communal sphere outside the family where one does not have to prove one’s worth as one does in the market. Community entails sharing benefits among members regardless of contribution; entitlements ensue simply because one belongs.

Community in this sense cannot simply be satisfied by abstract commitments such as knowing that one is a citizen in a state with good laws. The case of Hegel’s rabble is instructive. The rabble is alienated despite its ‘members’ being citizens; they do not have a social role with any security because they are unemployed or their work is precarious. In modern life they cannot have concrete freedom, and Hegel certainly does not see them as being offered that in anything like a community of the unemployed; their rights as persons are little consolation. The rabble is just a remainder that demonstrates the failure of the system of need and the state to incorporate them successfully into it. Any charity that might sustain them reinforces the limits of their social freedom. Community could offer them consolation, providing a sphere of acceptance that does not assert worth by virtue of a social role or the status from paid employment. But even if the rabble had a community, they could not be considered as having social freedom, for they could not see the institutions of civil society as their own since they are not participants in it. This is probably as it should be—they might develop community, but they do not have concrete freedom, since they are excluded from the significant objective structures of spirit.

A well-functioning state can replace the community in providing citizens with the certainty of the rule of law, possibly freedom from poverty and homelessness, and provide education and health that might allow an individual to be freed from contingent circumstances of their birth. Nevertheless, there is a need for a realm of non-economic values, and a sphere to which one belongs that is not the state, the social and economic roles of civil society, or the intimacy of the family. Without some version of community in Tönnies’s sense, we are left to either the uncertainty of a good family or the innumerable pathologies that the atomisation of modernity creates: insecurity, anxiety, amour-propre and so on. This normative sense of community does not sit easily with modernity. And the politics that such community might entail, in its conservative manifestation, is possibly incompatible with the liberal state.

Hegel’s fleeting criticisms of pre-modern societies present them as quasi-naturalistic orders in which people do what is ‘prescribed’, and the individual can break with these orders only on the basis of ‘individual discretion’ (PR §150R). Only the modern state is in a position to cultivate in its citizens a sense that communal ends should be their own and that there are good reasons for thinking, as per Rousseau’s general will, that these interests may be required to be
adopted at the expense of the interests of a specific community. Pre-modern communities cannot acknowledge universal reasons as justifications for actions because they are built out of dogmatic tradition and natural order, not a ‘free system of self-sufficient development and objectivity’ (PR §150). The self-determining subject is reconcilable with the collective life of the state because they cultivate the self-conscious willing of a universal.

The modern conundrum is that modernity requires us to acknowledge our self-producing character, and this ensures that civil society and the state are responsive to change and reflect the self-produced quality that allows for the ongoing transformative of norms. The dependency and comfort of Tönnies’s normative community is at odds with the requirement of modernity that we must consider our beliefs, claims and reasons as tentative. This is just the modern condition that there are no fixed norms; all of them can in principle be revised since their authority lies with acts of collective self-determination, not given orders of nature or God. The Philosophy of Right attempts to conceive a way by which a subject can be at home in a world set in motion, where belonging is difficult because traditional certainties have been swept away. Community in Tönnies’s and Heidegger’s sense, for all its comfort and security, cannot be reconciled with this ongoing demand for normative revision and self-correction. Only the family is reconcilable with that demand since it is grounded in love and offers no norms of belonging that conflict with civil society and the state; rather its role in ethical life complements both spheres.

Pre-modern forms of community had their structural inequalities and were often built on repressive customs that violently excluded those who were not members of the community. Traditional community could apply great force to the individual to compel her to comply. This is anachronistic in modernity; the state is needed to protect the individual against such conformity. Hegel does not undertake any serious theorisation of community, then, because it is unable to be integrated into modern life. This is indeed still something that is being worked through in modern society: how to come up with a sense of belonging and inclusiveness that does not entail the darker possibilities of traditional community, based on ethnic homogeneity or an attachment to place, which can be exclusive and even violently policed.

These explanations for why Hegel does not consider community as a structure of right in ethical life do not mean that the interest that it represents even in modern life has been overcome. The modern age, with its dynamic institutions and self-producing subjects, is at odds with traditional notions of community. Yet the importance of the substantialist aspiration that Hegel presents in Greek ethical life, and that runs throughout his objective spirit, is an acknowledgement that the desire for a communal end is a central motivation in
complex human interaction. The modern state is unable to reconcile the strands of subjective freedom and substantiality that run through the Philosophy Right. The elements of normative community, which Heidegger and Tönnies describe, and which are absent in the social organization of the system of needs, are not resolved in the modern state.

Honneth assumes that the atomisation can only be corrected at the political level by a participatory politics. He does not consider shared forms of life that are important spheres of self-realisation beyond state, civil society and the family. Community that is commensurate with civil society but not equal to it is difficult to comprehend, and may indeed be incompatible with modern life. But even if community is not a sphere of freedom in Hegel’s sense, and is not easily reconciled with modernity, that does not mean that the aspiration for it is not a determinate force in history. The need for the modern state to be an expression of concrete freedom proves that that aspiration exists, but does not satisfy it.

Community, in this normative sense, represents an important shared form of life that Hegel recognizes and that is an important drive in social organization but which overlays, although is outside, the tripartite structures of modern freedom. How does one build a supportive culture to which one can belong that is not exclusive and not built around economic self-interest? These are concerns with which Hegel is sympathetic, but as of 1821 what such a sphere might be was not conceivable in any straightforward way that was reconcilable with modern life. That this desire for belonging is at odds with the institutional structures of modern ethical life does not mean that the need has been removed. Hegel acknowledges that need throughout the objective spirit, but it is unlikely to achieve satisfaction in modernity. Whatever a modern version of community might be is still something being worked through.

While Hegel does not restrict our collective participation to the three iconic spheres of ethical life, it is only in these domains that we are at home with ourselves (and therefore free). These are the rational structures of modern freedom. Civil society represents the new basis of political power, and its structure is central to the organization of the state. But civil society and community are conflicting forces and the tension between them is not resolved in the state, unless one thinks that all the beneficial aspects of communal life, not available in society, are present in a higher form in the state. The communal aspect of Hegel’s state, or the material pathways through which it could be lived, is too thinly drawn to make this claim.

The tension between state and community remains a powerful yet under-theorized aspect of modern political life. That Hegel did not offer a revised version of community is entirely appropriate for a project of self-comprehension, given that in the subsequent 200 years community’s place in the contemporary social and
political landscape has remained almost as poorly understood and indeterminate as it was in the nineteenth century. It may be that Hegel—correctly—thought that whatever form a revised community might take, it had not shown itself even incipiently in the early nineteenth century. One might well argue that this is still the case. The relation between family, civil society and state has worked itself out into a formal relation in modern life in a manner that reflects Hegel’s appreciation of them as modern social freedom. Community as a shared form of life outside these domains has an uncertain place in modern life, and this is reflected in Hegel’s thought.22

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Notes

1 The term Hegel uses most often in the Phenomenology is Gemeinwesen, translated by Miller as community and by Pinkard as polity. Both terms have their advantages and disadvantages. Polity captures the normativity of communal life and also evokes the way in which communities of this sort involve prescribed social roles. But describing the family as a polity probably imbues it too much with the order of civil administration (see PhG §449).

2 Abbreviations:


3 See LNR §167 for Hegel’s brief comments on why Plato did not incorporate Socratic morality into the Republic. See also Velkley (2006) and Inwood (1984: 40–54).

4 ‘The opposite to Plato’s principle … was given primacy, particularly by Rousseau’ (LHP 2: 58/8: 225).
5 For a detailed examination of Rousseau’s influence on Hegel, see Neuhouser (2000).

6 For a recent examination of these issues which situates the socio-political developments in relation to the major economic theories of the day, see Herzog (2013: esp. 76–78).

7 See PR §201R, §252.

8 I have benefited from discussion with Heikki Ikäheimo and Loughlin Gleeson about this notion. For a clear discussion of concrete freedom, see Ikäheimo (2014: ch. 4).

9 These are sentiments reflected in numerous comments in LPWH 178–79. For discussions of normativity, ethical life and second nature see Lumsden (2012), Merker (2012).

10 Hegel uses at least five terms for community: Gemeinwesen (polity), Gemeinsamkeit or Gemeinsames (the communal life of corporations and estates, the commonality created through contract, a community of interests), Gemeinde (generally but not exclusively used in a parochial sense to describe limited local, usually religious communities), and Gemeinschaft—seldom used as a noun in the Philosophy of Right, but often used in the Phenomenology (see PhG §727). It is most often used in the Philosophy of Right as an adjective to describe the common will (gemeinschaftlichen Willens), communal interests or collectively owned property (gemeinschaftliche Eigentum) (see LNR §141R). In LNR §121 he uses Allgemeinen for community in a way that accords with how modern writers use Gemeinschaft.

11 There are a number of recent compelling reappraisals of Fichte’s political philosophy that present it as compatible with liberalism. See, e.g., Nomer (2010).

12 Hegel’s view of the Fichtean state is not high. He describes it as a police state that produces ‘a world of galley slaves, where each person is supposed to keep his fellow under constant supervision’ (LNR §119).

13 On patriotism see Moland (2009).

14 In Hegel’s case, because he opposes the dualistic model of state and civil society that one sees in Locke (for example), he wants to show that civil society is the basis for the modern state. See Riedel (1984: ch. 6, esp. 148).

15 ‘Freedom amounts to knowing and willing such universal and substantial objects as law and right, and producing an actuality that corresponds to them—the state’ (LPWH 114/191).

16 See Pippin (2008) for a discussion of institutional rationality.


18 ‘Community life means mutual possession and enjoyment of goods held in common’ Tönnies (2001: 36).

19 The only fully developed communal structures of right in the Philosophy of Right are the estates and the corporations, and these are, as we have seen, somewhat restricted forms of communal life.

20 See Lumsden (2009) for more detailed discussion.

21 For a superb analysis of the conflict between the unifying forces of the modernist state and communal forms of life, see Scott (1998).

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