

Hegel on Free Will

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Abstract

In this essay I present Hegel's philosophy of free will. Although free will plays a crucial role in Hegel's practical philosophy, freedom is also part of his philosophy of mind, his philosophy of nature, and his *Science of Logic*. After examining the philosophical motivations that led Hegel to create his system of philosophy, I will outline the basic concept of free will presented in the introduction to his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. This concept, however, still allows for free will skepticism, which motivates me to reconstruct the metaphysical underpinnings of Hegel's understanding of free will in his *Science of Logic*, which I will call his metaphysics of free will. In doing so, I will show that Hegel attempted to deal with the problem of the (in)compatibility of free will and the causal determination of the world. Finally, I present what I call Hegelian libertarianism, a form of an incompatibilist and indeterminist position on free will.

Keywords: Arbitrary will, Causality, Content, Self-causation, Metaphysics.

1. Introduction

Free will undoubtedly plays a significant role in Hegel's practical philosophy as a whole.¹ The intricate connection between free will and practical normativity is widely accepted such that free will is often taken to be a necessary condition for all practical normativity. It seems to make no sense to claim that we should or should not perform certain actions if we are (in principle) incapable of acting or refraining from acting otherwise. What's more interesting is the fact that the concept of freedom also plays a key role in parts of Hegel's philosophical system that are less frequently associated with the concept of free will—at least in his *Science of Logic* and the whole *Philosophy of Mind*, that is, in parts of his system that do not deal with questions of practical philosophy.

¹ Building on the basic normative concept of “right”, Hegel defines “right” as “the *existence of the free will*” (Hegel 1991: 58 [§29]). For specialists and those who may read Hegel in other editions or languages, I give the section numbers in brackets after the page numbers in my citations to the modern translations of the works referenced. In these additional citation details, R = remark, A = addition.

And yet, despite the fact that Hegel's concept of free will is central to his philosophy, it is very difficult to understand. And for this reason, or so I think, it is not well known outside of Hegel scholarship.² My goal in this essay, then, is to make Hegel's position explicit and accessible to those unfamiliar with his philosophy. Through (2) an examination of Hegel's philosophy, his method, and some metaphilosophical principles, (3) an analysis of key passages of the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, and (4) a discussion of what I call Hegel's metaphysics of free will, I explain what he has to say about the basic phenomenon of free will as the ability to bring about changes in the world at will.³ I conclude (5) with a brief characterization of a Hegelian libertarianism and hint at the fact that Hegel's core understanding of free will is enriched by a social philosophy.

2. Overview of Hegel's Philosophy

At least two facets of Hegel's philosophy make it very difficult to reconstruct his position on any classical philosophical problem, such as free will:

- (1) Hegel's philosophy consists of a whole system, so that each topic has its very specific place.⁴
- (2) The way in which traditional problems and positions are incorporated into this system transforms them in such a way that they lose their traditional form.⁵

Hegel not only criticized certain positions, but also the way in which a philosophical problem is formulated in the first place. It is this second facet of his philosophy that makes it particularly difficult to understand Hegel's account of free will and its relation to determinism. In order to overcome this difficulty and to reconstruct Hegel's theory of free will, one must first understand Hegel's system of philosophy and some of its central (metaphilosophical) tenets.

Hegel's account of free will consists of three sets of doctrines: (1) his metaphysics of free will; (2) his concept of free will as self-determination (in its forms of natural will, arbitrary will, and free will); (3) his theory of 'social' freedom, which consists of institutions that allow degrees of freedom to be realized. The basic structure of Hegel's entire philosophical system consists of three parts.⁶ The

² For example, anthologies and historical surveys of positions on free will include Aristotle, Plato, and Kant, but not Hegel. Similarly, those on topics such as causality.

³ This directly contradicts the reading of Pippin in Pippin 1999. I will discuss this disagreement in section 4 of this paper. For a critique of Pippin's reading, see Rorty 1999.

⁴ With regard to free will, Hegel explicitly asserts: "The deduction *that* the will is free and of *what* the will and freedom are—as already remarked in §2 above—is possible only within the context of the whole [of philosophy]" (Hegel 1991: 36-37 [§4R]).

⁵ The two facets are independent of each other: it is possible to have a system without criticizing the presuppositions of certain formulations of a problem (see, for example, the system in Lewis 1973: 88). And one can criticize the formulation of a particular problem without arguing for a whole system of philosophy (see Ryle 1949/2009: 1-13). For an interesting similarity between Ryle's and Hegel's solutions to the mind-body problem, see Wolff 1992.

⁶ Hegel's system as a whole can be found in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline* (Hegel 2010a; Hegel 1970/2004; Hegel 2007).

first part, the *Science of Logic* (Hegel 2010b), contains Hegel's metaphysics.⁷ The second part contains his *Philosophy of Nature* (Hegel 1970/2004), and the third part his *Philosophy of Spirit* (Hegel 2007). Not only does his system consist of these three parts, but Hegel claims a continuous development of all phenomena from beginning to end. Moreover, this continuity of concept development is said to be necessary. In addition, each concept can be reused to analyze and explain the next concepts. This is why the first facet—its systematicity—makes Hegel's philosophy so difficult to understand. One element cannot be understood without the others. Look at the passages on, say, the concept of free will, and you will be led to other passages involving central categories of the system. Those passages will lead you to other passages, and so on.

A first step in understanding Hegel's view of free will is to look at some rare and scattered passages in his (systematic) work⁸ where he comments on the traditional problem of free will. In these passages one can find clues as to where to look in the system to learn about Hegel's own view.

In one such remark in the *Philosophy of Right*, for example, Hegel criticizes the concept of arbitrary will, which I will discuss in more detail below. The problem with understanding free will as arbitrary will (allegedly presupposed, according to Hegel, by the traditional understanding of the problem of free will) is that it is dependent on externally given contents of the will. Even if I can choose whether or not to eat, given that I am hungry, I cannot choose to be hungry as such. The fact that I am hungry is something that is caused by a physiological state of my body. One criterion that a theory of free will must meet, then, is to explain how a willing being can determine the content of its own will. The content of a truly free willing being's will must be "its own self-determining activity as such" (Hegel 1991: 49 [§15R]). Hegel asserts that "arbitrariness may indeed be called a delusion if it is supposed to be equivalent to freedom" (Hegel 1991: 49 [§15R]).

Another passage in the *Philosophy of Right* has to do with Hegel's criticism of proving freedom of the will by reactive attitudes⁹. He writes

[I]n the manner of the older empirical psychology, the so-called *proof* of the will's freedom was derived from the various feelings and phenomena [*Empfindungen und Erscheinungen*] of ordinary consciousness, such as remorse, guilt, and the like, which could allegedly be *explained* only in terms of a *free* will" (Hegel 1992: 36 [§4R]).

Hereafter Hegel makes clear that he takes this to be the wrong way to analyze and justify freedom of the will. These passages therefore suggest a list of criteria that,

⁷ I use the term 'metaphysics' in a very broad and inclusive sense, as the study of the most fundamental categories or phenomena of reality, such as identity, unity, substance, or causality. For a more recent discussion of the status of Hegel's *Science of Logic* as metaphysics, see the contributions in De Laurentiis 2016 and Illetterati and Miolli 2022 and their further bibliographic references.

⁸ In addition to the *Encyclopedia* mentioned above, the systematic oeuvre also includes the *Science of Logic* (Hegel 2010b) in three books as an extended version of the first part of the system, and the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Hegel 1991) as an extended version of the second part of the *Philosophy of Spirit*, which Hegel calls "Objective Spirit" (Hegel 2007).

⁹ The term 'reactive attitude' goes back to Peter Frederick Strawson and his highly influential paper *Freedom and Resentment* (1962/2008).

in Hegel's view, a philosophical account of free will must meet. The first two criteria read as follows:

- C1: A philosophical account of free will must show that and how a will can determine the content of its willing itself, instead of merely choosing between externally given contents of willing.
- C2: A philosophical account of free will must not use phenomena that depend on the reality of free will (such as reactive attitudes) as an argument for the reality of free will.

As I will show later in this article, there are two more criteria to be mentioned, which are the focus of this essay:

- C3: A philosophical account of free will must allow for alternative possibilities as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for free will.
- C4: A philosophical account of free will must explain metaphysically how free will fits into a world of external, causal determination.

I will argue C3 can be deduced out of a passage whereas the argument for C4 is rather indirect in that Hegel is committed to it just by the way his whole system is constructed. I will start now by interpreting decisive passages of his *Philosophy of Right*.

3. Hegel's Concept of the Free Will

The most comprehensive and explicit account of Hegel's understanding of free will can be found in the introduction to his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Hegel 1991: 25-64 [§§1-33]). According to my reading of the introduction,¹⁰ this presentation is structured as follows. In §§5-9, Hegel presents the basic concept of the will.¹¹ He then introduces three forms of will, the natural will (§§10-13), the arbitrary will (§§14-20), and finally the free will (§§21-24).

Two things are important to note about this section of the Introduction. *First*, Hegel distinguishes between the concept and the phenomenon of the will. *Second*, Hegel distinguishes between the will as it appears to us in everyday life and the philosophy of the will, which uses a special philosophical terminology to analyze the true structure of the phenomenon. Hegel himself mentions that "it is possible to form an idea [*Vorstellen*] of them by consulting the self-consciousness of any individual. In the first place, anyone can discover in himself" (Hegel 1991: 37 [§4R]) certain abilities that are forms of a will.

To begin with what everyone can "discover" in themselves, one must look at Hegel's phenomenological description of willing.¹² Hegel distinguishes two different capacities that every willing being can experience in its everyday actualizations of will. There is the "ability to abstract from anything whatsoever, and likewise to determine himself, to posit any content in himself by his own agency" (Hegel 1991: 37 [§4R]). Thus:

Ability: To be able to abstract from any possible propositional content of willing.

¹⁰ I present a more explicit analysis of the introduction in Meyer 2020, Ch. 1.

¹¹ Contrary to the standard reading of the Introduction (like in Quante 1997 and Vieweg 2020), I also count §§8-9 as part of the basic concept of the will, because only there does Hegel present the difference between form and content of the will.

¹² For a phenomenology of free will, see Nahmias et al. 2013.

Ability₂: To be able to determine oneself by deciding for a propositional content of willing.

As I discuss below, both capacities are interdependent for their exercise. We can neither decide what we want to do without abstracting from the given possible contents of willing and without reflecting on these contents, nor can we exercise our ability to will if we would never finally decide for something specific. For, to abstract means to *not* do which means to *not* decide. What is Hegel's philosophical analysis of these aspects of willing?

3.1 Hegel's Abstract Concept of the Will

In what Hegel calls the "*formal [formale] will*" (Hegel 1991: 43 [§8]), he distinguishes different aspects of each act of will. *First*, there is the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. As a presupposition of every intention, there is a subjective, inner will that is opposed to an objective world, so that what is willed is not yet objectively the case. We, as willing beings, are self-conscious subjects who find ourselves in an objective world outside of ourselves. Our inner decision for a certain to-be-realized content of our will refers to this external world, for it is this objective world in which the content of the will is to be realized. But it is not realized as long as it is only part of the subjective, inner will. Therefore, and this is a *second* aspect, willing consists in the process of realizing this content. Willing means at least trying to realize one's intention. *Finally*, especially if one succeeds, the mere subjective content of willing has become an objective content of willing, a state of affairs. This description is obviously formal: it is absolutely neutral with regard to the content of one's will. Will, then, is constituted by the opposition between the subjective and the objective, and by the process of realizing the subjective in the objective.

The term "content of the will" then is introduced as such: "In so far as the will's determinations are *its own*—that is, its *internally* reflected particularization in general—they are its *content*" (Hegel 1991: 43 [§9]). Hegel then introduces the notion of purpose to refer to the content of the will. He distinguishes between the subjective purpose "as represented in the act of willing" and the objective purpose, "its end as actualized and accomplished through the mediation of its activity as it translates the subjective into objectivity" (Hegel 1991: 43 [§9]). I will therefore use the term "end" to refer to what is the content of one's will. The process of attempting to realize the end can thus be called an "end-realization-attempt" (Gethmann 1998, 2016, my translation).¹³

In order to make an end one's own, one must be able to abstract from different ends. This ability₁ in turn depends for its possibility on what Hegel calls "universality" (Hegel 1991: 37 [§37]). "The will contains (α) the element of *pure indeterminacy* or of the 'I's pure reflection into itself, in which every limitation, every content, whether present immediately through nature, through needs, desires, and drives, or given and determined in some other way, is dissolved; this is the limitless infinity of *absolute abstraction* or *universality*, the pure thinking of oneself" (Hegel 1991: 37 [§5]).

All of these admittedly dubious characterizations are based on the idea that will is a form of mind. As volitional beings, we are spiritual beings. This sense of the spiritual can be explained by the ability to think—which in turn requires the

¹³ Gethmann uses this term to define 'action'.

ability to know that one is thinking (i.e., to have self-consciousness). This in turn includes the ability to abstract or refrain from mentally represented possible ends—thus ability₁. Pure thinking about oneself is an alternative description of self-consciousness. Insofar as will consists among other things of this ability₁, which is a form of self-consciousness, a necessary condition holds for the will:

For all x : x has a will only if x has self-consciousness.

Of course, our will would not be a will if we were not able to decide on a certain end, to choose among many possible ends the one we want to realize. This aspect is the particularity of the will:

For all x : x has a will only if x determines itself, particularizes itself.

Through this moment of self-determination, “ I steps into existence” (Hegel 1991: 39 [§6]). Formulated in first-person terms, this means that I only come into existence as this concrete willing subject, which I am, when I determine myself to a content of my will. As the addition to §6 states: “I do not merely will—I will *something*” (Hegel 1991: 40 [§6A]).¹⁴ It is precisely this ability that most participants in contemporary debates about free will have in mind when they think about the ability to choose.

Up to this point, Hegel’s description seems to reflect the way we perceive ourselves as willing beings. Only in §7 does it become clear that universality and particularity for Hegel are merely abstractions and thus one-sided moments of self-consciousness, whose unity is the will, the unity of

particularity reflected into itself and thereby restored to universality. It is individuality [Einzelheit], the self-determination of the ‘I’, in that it posits itself as the negative of itself, that is, as determinate and limited, and at the same time remains with itself [bei sich], that is, in its identity with itself and universality; and in this determination, it joins together with itself alone (Hegel 1991: 41 [§7]).

This passage is difficult to understand. In a sense, the particularity and universality of the will contradict each other, since the former is about the will being undetermined, while the latter is about the will being determined. How an act of will can be understood as still maintaining the first aspect of universality is described by Hegel through his core understanding of the freedom of the will:

“ I ” determines itself in so far as it is the self-reference of negativity. As this *reference to itself*, it is likewise indifferent to this determinacy; it knows the latter as its own and as *ideal*, as a mere *possibility* by which it is not restricted but in which it finds itself merely because it posits itself in it.—This is the *freedom* of the will, which constitutes the concept or substantiality of the will, its gravity, just as gravity constitutes the substantiality of a body (Hegel 1991: 41 [§7]).

For example, suppose a person A is thinking about certain given possible actions in an upcoming situation. After a while, A decides on a certain way of acting (Φ) and starts to act. Even though A becomes determined, that is, willing and doing Φ , this determination is not a constraint on A ’s universality, because (1) it was A herself who decided for Φ , and (2) because A did not necessarily decide for Φ .

¹⁴ The additions (*Zusätze*) were added to the main text after Hegel’s death and consist of lecture notes from Hegel’s students.

Deciding for Φ was an alternative, and A could have decided and acted differently.

Hegel further explains his understanding of freedom of the will through the concept of self-determination. In other words, when we determine our will and decide to do something, we limit ourselves. For not only do we decide that we want to do Φ , but at the same time we decide against doing all other alternative actions Φ' that are incompatible with doing Φ . In doing so, however, we set a limit for ourselves. Because we, as self-conscious beings, can abstract from everything and thus enter into the thinking-contemplative distance from everything, we must also preserve this characteristic of our universality in self-determination. We do this by staying with ourselves in self-determination. I am the one who decides. And this I, which decides, remains at the same time according to its concept, even if it determines a certain content. The reference to ends, to determinations of the will, is a possible reference of the kind that one can know in principle that one does not have to choose a certain end. It is only possible to decide for it. Therefore, the will is indifferent to its ends.

This claim about the self-determination of our will implies that Hegel's understanding of freedom of the will is committed to alternative possibilities. Suppose I am considering whether to Φ or ψ , where Φ ing and ψ ing are strictly opposed. Having decided for ψ and thus against Φ ing, it still holds that I could have done differently, that I could have decided for Φ and thus against ψ ing.¹⁵ As one discussant in a dialogue on free will puts it, "being able to act differently is the same as being confronted with alternatives" (Williams 1980: 36).

3.2 Three Forms of the Will: Natural, Arbitrary, Free

On the first level, the content of the will is "*immediate*" (Hegel 1991: 44 [§10]). Hegel calls this first form of will "*natural will*". In this form of will it is "the *drives, desires, and inclinations* by which the will finds itself naturally determined" (Hegel 1991: 45 [§11]). On the level of the natural will, these determinations appear to be immediately given. Insofar as I have a natural will, there is still a lack of rationality. Form and content are different: the form is that everything is for me, that it is I who wills. The content, however, is not yet me, but immediately given, natural content. So the form of the will is that the content is for me, my content. Such a finite will is therefore rational in itself, but "does not yet have the form of rationality" (Hegel 1991: 45 [§11]). Here it is already clear that Hegel himself gives space to the drives and thus to the natural will within the framework of his philosophy of right. There is something objective about the drives that is "without the form of irrationality" (Hegel 1991: 45 [§11R]). Especially with regard to the second form of will, the arbitrary will, it may help to emphasize that the natural will does not yet choose between different options. What makes it still a form of will is the actual decision for a certain content. For those familiar with the so-called Frankfurt-style cases in the analytic philosophy of free will, natural will is

¹⁵ Of course, the mere claim of alternative possibilities does not in itself prove that Hegel is right, but it does show that his concept of freedom of the will implies alternative possibilities and thus the ability to do otherwise, therefore criterion C3. I discuss the metaphysical underpinnings of this claim and the direction of the argument below.

precisely what saves freedom from cases where there is no alternative. It is the mere fact of the decision that makes it a form of will.¹⁶

It is not easy to understand what Hegel has in mind when he speaks of the natural will. It seems to be a borderline case, such that small children and perhaps some animals might have a natural will in this sense. He calls it “natural” because the content is naturally given, and yet it is a case of will because there is the element of decision. At the same time, the decision must not be confused with a choice between at least two different options. Natural will does not decide between options, there is no reflection on given contents. And yet the actual decision for a content and the action on it is a necessary part of the will. Although it may still be difficult to understand, I would suggest that the exercise of natural will is different from, say, a mere disposition or reflex, a naturally caused movement, for example, as is the difference between what, say, a dog did and where something happened to the dog.¹⁷

A limitation of the natural will arises, a function of the formal character of the natural will. Within the natural will, form and content fall apart. Therefore, the natural will participates in freedom only insofar as it is a deciding will. The fact that the natural will decides at all makes it partly free, but it is still not free insofar as its content is not determined by itself. Not only are the possible ends naturally given, but the natural will does not reflect upon and compare these different possibilities. Rather, the main exercise of the will consists in the affirmative decision for a certain content. Insofar as free agency is understood as the ability to decide for an end and to act on this decision (see Dworkin 1970: 381), natural will can also be called the ability to *act freely*.

As natural, the will fulfills only the first conceptual moment of being “the self-reflecting *infinite* ‘I’ which is with itself [*bei sich selbst*] (see §5)” (Hegel 1991: 47 [§14]). In terms of content, the natural will is not with itself, but in natural drives, desires, and needs as something other than itself. Due to the structure of self-consciousness, however, finite will is “*above* its content” (Hegel 1991: 47 [§14]). In one respect it is bound to this content “as to the determinations of its nature and of its external actuality”, namely as “only formally infinite” will; unbound, however—and insofar as it stands just above the content—it is as “indeterminate” (Hegel 1991: 47 [§14]) will. It follows from the first conceptual feature that the content of the will, which the will makes its own, is only one possible content among others:

[S]ince it is indeterminate, it is not restricted to this or that content in particular. To this extent, this content is only a possible one for the reflection of the ‘I’ into itself; it may or may not be mine; and ‘I’ is the *possibility* of determining myself to this or to something else, of *choosing* between these determinations which the ‘I’ must in this respect regard as external (Hegel 1991: 47-48 [§14]).

The immediately given contents of the will are then possible contents of the will insofar as it depends on me, on my choice, whether I set them as mine or not.

¹⁶ Pippin explicitly rejects this element of the will as part of a free will in Pippin 1999: 194. I will discuss Pippin’s view in the section on Hegel’s metaphysics of freedom.

¹⁷ In a sense, Wittgenstein’s famous distinction between “I raise my arm” and “my arm rises” (Wittgenstein [1953] 2009, §621) can also be applied to small children and animals.

Furthermore, I can choose among the contents: “The freedom of the will, according to this determination, is *arbitrariness*, in which the following two factors are contained: free reflection, which abstracts from everything, and dependence on an inwardly or externally given content and material” (Hegel 1991: 48 [§15]). If one further defines natural will in such a way that it is itself that chooses a content, then the freedom of will consists in arbitrariness (hence *arbitrary* will). This leads to the problem of happiness for free will-indeterminism. “Since this content, which is necessary *in itself* as an end, is at the same time determined as a possible content in opposition to free reflection, it follows that arbitrariness is *contingency* in the shape of will” (Hegel 1991: 48 [§15]). Insofar as arbitrary will is understood as freedom of choice, it is contingency:

- (P1) The natural content of the will is in itself a necessary content.
- (P2) As an object of reflection, this content is only possible or not necessary content.
- (P3) The alternation of necessity and possibility is contingency.
- (C) Therefore arbitrariness is contingency, since it alternates between necessary and non-necessary content.

Obviously, the first two premises are contradictory. How could we interpret them in a consistent way? That the natural content of the will is necessary could mean that I feel hunger, pain, or tiredness because of the necessity of a natural law. It is not necessary or possible in the sense that it is up to me how to respond to this natural content of the will. Interestingly, for Hegel, contingency is not a possibility that is not necessary. Rather, contingency consists in a certain combination of naturally necessarily given contents and the possibility of reacting to these contents in one way or another. What is contingent in the classical sense is that what the arbitrary will wills is something actual even though it is not necessary. So I interpret the conclusion as follows: There is no principle that decides for a certain given content.

Hegel also identifies the shortcomings of this second understanding of the free will. It is true that reflection, as the knowledge of one's own freedom of choice, brings with it a certainty that enriches the natural will. But the problem is that free will itself is not the object of will. Instead, the object of the will is an externally given content. Thus the object is not yet an infinite one, as would be the case if the will had itself as its content. Therefore it follows: “Instead of being the will in its truth, arbitrariness is rather the will as *contradiction*” (Hegel 1991: 48 [§15R]). The argument for the thesis of the contradictory nature of arbitrary will is as follows:

- (P1) Free will is absolute self-determination.
- (P2) Free will as arbitrariness is self-determination according to a given content and thus not absolute self-determination.
- (C) Free will as arbitrariness is absolute and not absolute self-determination.

Because of the conceptual moment of universality, in order to be able to refrain from all content, it is also possible to refrain from a chosen content. Thus it might seem that the freedom of the will corresponds to the concept of infinity. However, it “does not escape from finitude” (Hegel 1991: 50 [§16]). The mere renunciation of given finite contents testifies to independence only to a certain degree and thus allows autonomy only in a limited sense. However, this step of the abstract negative is itself afflicted with the negatum, since “every such content is different from

the form [of the will] and therefore finite; and the opposite of determinacy—namely indeterminacy, indecision, or abstraction—is only the other, equally one-sided moment” (Hegel 1991: 50 [§16]). As long as I can preserve my infinity only by renouncing the given contents of the will that are available for choice, I am not really free, for the ability to make a particularizing decision would be lacking. Without the ability to make a concrete choice, I remain only abstractly free. I call this kind of freedom *particular autonomy*. We are autonomous in the exercise of our arbitrary will insofar as we recognize our particular, contingent nature.

Hegel’s discussion of possible conflicts between given contents leads us to what real or, as I call it, *universal autonomy* would look like. There are all sorts of different impulses, needs, and desires that drive us to do or not to do various things. Let us call these natural (practical) reasons. In many cases, the following conflict of incompatibility of natural reasons applies:

TWO NATURAL REASONS (drives, needs, etc.) x and y are INCOMPATIBLE with each other *iff* it is not possible to satisfy both x and y at the same time.¹⁸

For example, if “the satisfaction of the one demands that the satisfaction of the other be subordinated or sacrificed” (Hegel 1991: 50 [§17]), then these are two incompatible natural reasons. This observation may not seem new, since everyone knows this kind of conflict. On the level of freedom of choice, however, the question arises as to how such cases are and can be dealt with. According to Hegel, dealing with conflicts of natural reasons consists in mere decisionism. It is an arbitrary decision for which there is no additional decision principle, except to decide precisely. Although Hegel names one possible decision principle, the maximization of satisfaction, the existence of such a principle does not change the fact that the decision is decisionistic, since in the end the choice of one rather than the other decision principle is—again—left to mere decision.¹⁹ It is true that the totality of the given drives and needs can be brought into an order, but even so, arbitrariness is not an adequate determination of free will, since it only fulfills “*formal universality*” (Hegel 1991: 52 [§20]).

What is interesting, however, is that here one might get a first idea of what real free will consists of. The difference between arbitrariness and free will would be the difference between choosing a certain flavor of ice cream and choosing a certain principle of decision. The fact that I choose a certain principle of decision is not something that came up naturally, like my desire to eat ice cream. It is something that I made up myself. In this sense, free will proper must consist in choosing such higher rules, norms, principles that guide both our individual actions and our social institutions.

Formal universality is not yet true universality, because it refers to contents (drives, needs) that are given rather than self-determined. The adequate determination of this still limited form of universality is “*self-determining universality, the will, or freedom*” (Hegel 1991: 52 [§21]). Freedom in the full sense must therefore be self-determination not only in form but also in content: “When the will has universality, or itself as infinite form, as its content, object [*Gegenstand*], and end, it is free not only *in itself* but also *for itself*—it is the Idea in its truth” (Hegel 1991: 52 [§21]). Truly free will has itself as its object. It is universality and indeed infinite

¹⁸ Compare this to Raz’s account of conflicting reasons (1975/1999: 25-26).

¹⁹ This may be an interesting view for contemporary decision theory, which is based on the principle of utility maximization.

form. Therefore, the content itself must also be the infinite form. This remark explains free will in contrast to the first two forms.

The natural will is self-consciousness “external to itself” (Hegel 1991: 52 [§21R]). This exteriority of the natural will results from its sensibility. Since will implies self-consciousness, this sensibility is the exteriority of self-consciousness. Reflective will or volition is determined both by this sensibility and by the “thinking universality” (Hegel 1991: 52 [§21R]). The sensitivity is due to the fact that arbitrariness still has given contents as its object, the thinking universality consists in the fact that these are only possibilities and can be chosen or not chosen. The ability to choose implies the ability to abstract. Free will has itself as its object, and thus its own universality as its content, and not something merely naturally given. However, “*immediacy*” (Hegel 1991: 52 [§21R]) (natural will) and “*particularity*” (Hegel 1991: 52 [§21R]) (arbitrary will) are preserved in free will. Thus, free will, which has its own universality as its object, must not be misunderstood as consisting in the rejection and negation of sensually given contents. How these contents themselves are integrated, however, remains to be clarified. Nor is the reflection of arbitrariness simply negated. It, too, will continue to play a role in free will that remains to be determined.

Now the activity of thinking is precisely the process “by which the particular is superseded and raised to the universal” (Hegel 1991: 53 [§21R]). Thinking thus reasserts itself in the will, insofar as self-consciousness realizes itself through the will, leading to itself in the passage through various forms of will (natural, reflective): “Here is the *point at which it becomes clear* that it is only as *thinking* intelligence that the will is truly itself and free” (Hegel 1991: 53 [§21R]). The mind develops toward self-consciousness in the form of thinking and intelligence. In this respect, thinking is initially an epistemic attitude in the sense of a direction appropriate to the mind and the world. It is true that through this epistemic attitude the mind attains knowledge of itself. However, the mind does not fulfill its purpose of determining and realizing itself through mere thinking. Therefore, it must become active itself, which it can do only by transforming the mind-to-world direction of fit into a world-to-mind direction of fit, while retaining the first aspect. As Michael Quante observes:

Self determination of the will has to be conceptualized as the logical interdependence of the first and second aspect which belong together in every person’s free will. No person wills her “Ich” purely and without further content. And no person wants merely the content of her will. In wanting something a person always wants herself and the content as her content (Quante 1997: 65).

Hegel has three versions of a concept of will. Although the most minimal version of the will includes freedom, it lacks certain elements of the other forms. Central to Hegel’s concept of free will in all its forms is a combination of determinism and indeterminism. Insofar as free will consists in self-determination, an undetermined will would not be free. On the other hand, there are forms of determinism that render a will unfree or not fully free. A free willing being is free to the extent that it determines itself. That it determines itself means that its determination is up to itself. That it is up to itself means that it is not determined by anything other than itself.

But that the determination of *x*’s will is up to *x*’s self is ambiguous: (1) it could mean that the *decision* for a determined content is up to *x*, or (2) it could mean that

the *content* for the decision is itself constituted by *x*. Even if arbitrary will is free in the first sense, it is not free in the second. Only if the determination of the content itself is up to a willing being can it be called free in the full sense. The only way that the content itself is subject to a willing being is that the content is nothing other than what the free willing being is—hence Hegel's expression “*the free will which wills the free will*” (Hegel 1991: 57 [§27]).

How can the content be understood if it is free will itself? As already indicated, my proposal is to say that the content of free will is rules.²⁰ Rules are free will itself, because they are action-guiding tools that are universal in the sense that they hold:

1. For *all* (or at least many different) *individuals*
2. For *all* (or at least many different) *times*
3. For *all* (or at least many different) *situations*

Of course, this proposal says nothing about which rules are legitimate or rational.²¹ Understood in this way, free will has itself as its object insofar as it has rules as its objects, while these rules are themselves made by free will and thus by the content that is itself made by the will. To sum up Hegel's threefold analysis of the concept of free will:

- | | |
|-----------------------|--|
| <i>Natural will</i> | The most basic core ability to decide and begin to act (<i>acting freely</i>). |
| <i>Arbitrary Will</i> | The ability to think about given contents of will and to choose one over the other and to start acting on that choice (<i>particular autonomy</i>). |
| <i>Free will</i> | The ability to make up rules (second-order) of how to decide for contents (first-order), and to decide for such rules based on adequate self-understanding as a spiritual being (<i>universal autonomy</i>). |

A free will skeptic might take all this for granted, but point out that it all depends on the claim that we have the ability to act freely in the first place. And this capacity itself may be incompatible with a deterministic world. So even Hegel's account stands or falls with his response to the traditional problem of free will and determinism. That we can, in principle, act freely is precisely what the *Science of Logic* is supposed to prove—among many other things, I am sure. The ‘logical’ underpinning of Hegel's understanding of free will that I have reconstructed so far is what I will call his metaphysics of free will.

4. Hegel's Metaphysics of Free Will

According to the proposed fourth criterion, a theory of free will must deal with the question of the compatibility of free will and causal determination. In order to see how Hegel deals with this, it seems quite natural to look at the very passage in Hegel's system that deals explicitly with causality. But this might seem unpromising, for, as Quante argues, in the introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*

²⁰ Note that this is not a second-order account of volition, for the truly free will has rules and institutions as its content, not first-order desires. See Quante 1997 for a very helpful and insightful discussion of Hegel within the second-order volition debate.

²¹ Hegel answers this question in the three parts of the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*.

Hegel assumes that causality is overcome in teleology (1997: 58).²² If teleology, which Hegel discusses in the third book of the *Science of Logic*, overcomes causality and thus proves the inability of causality to explain certain phenomena, then why look at causality at all? (Quante 1997: 58). Although I concede Quante's and also Vieweg's claim, I read Hegel's chapter on causality (Hegel 2010b: 492-503) as relying on the concept of *causa sui* to prove how freedom is possible in a causally determined world.²³ In my reading, this depends on a much broader impetus of Hegel's *Science of Logic*: one problem it is supposed to solve is the possibility of freedom.²⁴ Instead of thinking about what free will should look like if it is to be compatible with the total determinism of the natural world, Hegel arranged the whole theory of determinism and the natural world in such a way as to ensure absolute free self-realization.²⁵ A guiding question of the *Science of Logic*, and perhaps of the whole system, would then be: How should the world be organized so that freedom can be realized in it?

The chapter on causality is part of the second book of the *Science of Logic*, the *Doctrine of Essence*. As Hegel makes very clear in the encyclopedic version, "the cause is thus in and for itself *causa sui*" (Hegel 2010a: 226 [§153R]). In the *Doctrine of Essence*, Hegel first analyzes the concept of *causa sui*, applies it to finite entities and shows that they realize the concept of *causa sui* only inadequately, and finally introduces a first stable phenomenon of *causa sui* within finite determinations, namely action and reaction, which leads to mutual causation or reciprocity of action (*Wechselwirkung*). Interestingly, mutual causation, as the very last category of the *Doctrine of Essence*, allows for the introduction of the term 'freedom'.²⁶ The chapter on causality shows not only that even for Hegel typical, finite causal processes (such as a rolling billiard ball hitting another and causing it to roll) are forms of self-causation. It also argues for the much more important phenomenon of substance causation, such that a substance exerts causal power out of itself.

Nevertheless, even for Hegel, a stone does not exercise substance causation, but only causally contributes to external causes acting upon it. This raises the question of which phenomena are real instantiations of the concept of substance

²² Vieweg (2020: 61) also argues that the logic of the concept is decisive.

²³ For a thorough and detailed analysis of the chapter on causality, see my Meyer 2017. This talk of "causally determined" still leaves open the question of determinism as the claim that everything that happens is exclusively causally necessary.

²⁴ According to Pippin (1999: 195), the whole system can be understood as dealing with the question of the possibility and realization of freedom.

²⁵ I rely on the work of Christopher Yeomans (2012), who explicitly analyzes Hegel's formal, structural elements for freedom in the *Science of Logic*. I therefore side with Yeomans (2012: 4) here, albeit from a different angle: Hegel's theory of causality in the *Doctrine of Essence*. That Hegel arranged the whole theory of determinism and the natural world in such a way as to ensure absolute free self-realization can be explained by a core theme of German Idealism, which is to see subjectivity as the core phenomenon of all reality. If all reality can only be adequately understood as a form of realization of subjectivity, then the natural world must also be such that it allows for free self-realization, especially for those beings who are subjects par excellence.

²⁶ As Hegel writes: "Causality has thus returned to its absolute concept and has at the same time attained the concept itself. At first it is real necessity, absolute self-identity, in which the difference between it and the determinations which refer to each other in it are substances, free actualities, in relation to each other. Necessity is thus inner identity; causality is its manifestation, in which its reflexive splendour of substantial otherness has been sublated, and necessity is elevated to freedom" (Hegel 2010b: 504).

causation. A remark in the chapter on causality gives us a clue. Hegel warns against analyzing living beings (natural as well as spiritual) in terms of finite causality (that is, the deficient form of causality) (Hegel 2010b: 496). Regarding the causal influence on living beings, Hegel states that “anything that has an effect on a living thing is independently determined, altered, and transmuted by the latter, *for the living thing will not let the cause come to its effect*, that is, it sublates it as cause” (Hegel 2010b: 496).²⁷ Although this passage is not directly about substance causation, it is interesting because it contains an observation about a causal influence on living beings. The idea of determinism and its threat to the freedom of the will presupposes that willing beings are such that causal influences on them cause them to do things, in the same sense that a rolling billiard ball causes another to start rolling when the second is hit by the first. But living beings are not only capable of “sublating” external causal influences, they are also capable of being *causae sui*, of causing themselves to do certain things simply by beginning to do them.²⁸

Hegel analyzes the categories that structure the world, such as causality, in such a way as to ensure the realization of freedom by arguing that they themselves are already a (albeit inadequate) form of the realization of freedom.²⁹ But does this mean that Hegel takes a compatibilist position and at the same time claims determinism? Robert Pippin ascribes to Hegel a form of compatibilism.

My proposal will be to say that for Hegel, freedom of the will is dependent on, and thus compatible with, a certain form of determinism, but incompatible with another. In the end, the position ends up as a form of libertarianism that allows for determination in the world even as it rejects the absolute determinism of everything that happens. In my reading, then, Hegel must be understood as an incompatibilist and indeterminist.³⁰

5. Hegelian Libertarianism: A Systematic Proposal

How does it all fit together? In order to locate Hegel’s understanding of free will within the traditional debate about free will and its compatibility with determinism, it is worth starting with his metaphysics of free will.

Free will is a form of self-determination. Causality as a category is also analyzed by Hegel as a form of self-determination. That is, his concept of finite causality, which consists in a regular process of quantity transfer between substances, is itself a (in principle) deficient form of self-determination. Free will is a form of self-realization that is not deficient in principle. Even if causal processes are determined in such a way that the instantiation of an event *B* is necessitated by an antecedent event *A*, this kind of determinism does not exclude the possibility of genuine self-determination, that is, a form of determination that is brought about by the very thing whose determination it is. This means that for Hegel not all

²⁷ For a thorough interpretation of this passage, see my Meyer 2023.

²⁸ Pippin, I think, therefore misinterprets the passage as evidence that Hegel “does not understand the possibility of freedom as depending on the possession by an individual of some kind of causal power, the power to initiate action by an act of will in some way independent of antecedent causal conditions” (Pippin 1999: 194).

²⁹ This follows from Hegel’s claim that all forms that are philosophically analyzed must be understood as realizations of the Absolute, whereas the Absolute has the structure of subjectivity. Therefore, criterion C4 is fulfilled by the definition of Hegel’s philosophy.

³⁰ I therefore disagree with both Pippin 1999 and Huesca Ramón 2015.

events are brought about by external necessity. What he does hold, however, is that many kinds of events must be such that they are regularly brought about by external causes. Let us call this Determinism_{weak}: Many events *B* in the world are such that their occurrence was caused by a prior external event *A*, and that every instantiation of *A* is followed, *ceteris paribus*, by an instantiation of *B*.

As an existential proposition, it is compatible with the claim that there are some events in the world that are not determined in this sense. In order for free will to be possible, Determinism_{weak} must be true. For suppose it were false. Then there would be no event type, or at least there were not sufficiently many, in the world such that any instantiation of it would be regularly determined by the instantiation of some other earlier event type. Insofar as free will is possible only if there are some exercises of free will, and insofar as an exercise of free will consists in determining one's will at t_i to make it the case that p at t_{i+n} , it must be possible to know that and how one could make it the case that p at t_{i+n} . It is only possible to know this if the world behaves in a regular way. If Determinism_{weak} is false, the world is not regular. Therefore, Determinism_{weak} must be true if free will is to be possible.³¹ Thus, although Determinism_{weak} must be true for the freedom of the will, a stronger version of determinism would make freedom impossible, which we can call Determinism_{strong}: All events *X* in the world are such that their occurrence was caused by some prior external event *Y*, and that every instantiation of *Y* is followed, *ceteris paribus*, by an instantiation of *X*.³² There are real events in the world that are undetermined in this sense (human actions). But this does not preclude these events from being determined in any sense.³³ For the core concept of free will is that of self-determination, and self-determination is *a fortiori* determination. In order for self-determination to be possible, there must be real cases of substance or agent causation in the world—that is, the power to behave and thus to cause an event from itself.³⁴

In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel distinguishes three different types of will: natural will (the ability to act freely), arbitrary will (the ability of particular autonomy), and free will (the ability of universal autonomy). All three presuppose a freedom of will that is compatible with and dependent on Determinism_{weak}. Only if the content of willing is free will itself can the will be called free in the full sense. For only then is the will capable of determining the content of willing itself, instead of merely choosing between externally given contents of willing. An act of free will in this sense consists in willingly following (knowing and valuing) social rules, which are themselves such that they are realizations of free will (see

³¹ This could also be seen as an answer to the luck problem for indeterminists.

³² I don't see Hegel taking a compatibilist position in the sense that free will is compatible with determinism_{strong}. Again, Pippin seems indecisive when he writes: "This means that the 'inappropriateness' of the principles of nature for explaining certain processes and alterations will have to be sought elsewhere in Hegel, not by appeal to and defense of this strong or voluntarist notion of spontaneity" (Pippin 1999: 195). Pippin seems to think that Hegel strongly rejected determinism somewhere in his system, which would make him an indeterminist and a libertarian given his position that free will is real.

³³ Of course, unless one accepts only events as (causally) determining factors for events.

³⁴ For a more recent version of agent causation, see Mayr 2011.

Neuhouse 2000: 82-113). Thus, free will and phenomena of free will take place on two different levels—subjective and objective freedom.³⁵

The three spheres of freedom (abstract right, morality, and ethical life) are different institutional arrangements that realize objective freedom to different degrees. Individual freedom is realized by acting in accordance with these institutions. Here it becomes clear why, for Hegel, a mere individual will is not the highest and most important form of free will. Institutional arrangements remain robust no matter how one thinks about them and no matter how one values them. Although institutions depend on the basic form of individual free will for their emergence and reproduction, they themselves determine the wills and actions of the individuals who live within them. Only to a small extent are we as individuals ourselves agents of change of these institutions.

If one wanted to label Hegel's position, one could call him a libertarian (free will is incompatible with determinism_{strong}, but free will is real and therefore determinism_{strong} is false, even though determinism_{weak} must be true) who claims that our will is free in principle. He is an agent-causalist, whereas self-causation is to be understood as self-determination, and self-determination consists in deciding on rules and institutions.

I do not go into the question of which concrete rules and institutions are such that they actually realize freedom; that would be part of a reconstruction of Hegel's normative theory. What can be said, however, is that whatever rules are said to be rational, they must satisfy the criterion of constituting free will in the fullest sense.³⁶

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³⁵ Neuhouse uses this difference to apply it to social freedom, which is the subject of "Ethical Life" (Hegel 1991: 189-380 [§§142-360]). I think that even "Abstract Right" (Hegel 1991: 67-132 [§§34-104]) and "Morality" (Hegel 1991: 135-86 [§§105-41]) are forms of social freedom, so that the distinction between subjective and objective freedom can also be applied to these spheres of freedom. Since I am not arguing for this view in this essay, I will omit the term 'social'.

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