

Hegel, Habermas, and the Discourse of Modernity

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Abstract: This paper examines the central place of G.W.F. Hegel in Jürgen Habermas's *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, a work that has had a lasting impact on debates concerning the fate of the modern project. Against the backdrop of disputes surrounding modernity and its critics, Habermas presents Hegel as the first philosopher to grasp modernity as a distinct philosophical problem, while also treating his system as an unsuccessful attempt to overcome the contradictions of subject-centered reason. This paper reconstructs Habermas's interpretation of Hegel's account of modernity, analyzes the two main lines of his critique, and then offers a critical response. It argues that Habermas's reading does not fully capture several central features of Hegel's philosophy, especially the concept of Geist, and that the model of communicative rationality, while intended as an alternative to subject-centered reason, does not entirely avoid the difficulties it is meant to address.

Keywords: Hegel; Jürgen Habermas; modernity; critical theory

1. Introduction

The status of the modern project remains a major issue in contemporary philosophy. Debates over modernity, postmodernity, Enlightenment, and deconstruction have generated an extensive and often divided body of discussion. Within this context, Jürgen Habermas's *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, first published in German in 1985, occupies a distinctive place. In this work, Habermas moves beyond sociological or historical description and locates the problem of modernity within a continuing philosophical debate extending from the Enlightenment to contemporary French thought. For Habermas, modernity is bound up with the normative aspirations of cognitive

rationality, moral autonomy, and collective self-determination. These aspirations require neither uncritical affirmation nor simple rejection, but sustained philosophical clarification.

A central feature of Habermas's account is the role he assigns to G.W.F. Hegel. On Habermas's reading, Hegel is the first philosopher to treat modernity as a distinct philosophical problem and to confront the tensions internal to its principle of subjectivity. Hegel therefore occupies a privileged position in the narrative of modern philosophy developed in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, including Habermas's account of the paths that lead from Hegel to later critiques of modern reason. This paper examines Hegel's place in that narrative. It first reconstructs Habermas's reading of Hegel's theory

of modernity, then analyzes the main lines of his critique of Hegel's system, and finally offers a critical response. The paper argues that Habermas's interpretation does not fully account for several important features of Hegel's philosophy, especially the concept of Geist, and that his alternative framework leaves unresolved some of the difficulties it seeks to overcome.

2. Hegel as the Philosopher of Modernity

While the Renaissance, Reformation, and early Enlightenment heralded a definitive break with classical and medieval thought, Habermas argues that it was Hegel who first articulated the philosophical meaning of modernity in its full scope. For Hegel, the core of modernity lies in the principle of subjectivity—a principle that encompasses three defining commitments of modern life: individualism, critical rational competence, and the autonomy of action (Habermas, 1987, p.27). This principle had already been central to Enlightenment thought, and Immanuel Kant had systematized it with unprecedented rigor by grounding the separate spheres of modern science, categorical ethics, and aesthetic judgment in the structure of the transcendental subject. For Kant, reason was differentiated into distinct moments of theoretical cognition, practical reason, and judgment, each with its own legitimate domain and governing rules. (Habermas, 1987, p.29)

Yet Habermas points to a critical limitation in Kant's account: while Kant analyzed the differentiation of reason into separate value spheres, he did not grasp this differentiation as a problem. He failed to recognize the divisions and cleavages—the Entzweiungen—that this differentiation introduced into modern social and spiritual life, and thus ignored the urgent need for synthesis and reconciliation that emerged inevitably from his own system. This is precisely the starting point of Hegel's philosophical intervention. While Hegel fully accepts the principle of subjectivity and the emancipatory gains of modernity, he is the first thinker to confront its fundamental ambivalence: the

principle of subjectivity, for Hegel, explains both the superiority of the modern world and its crisis character, its promise of unending progress and its reality of alienated spirit (Habermas, 1987, p.27). In this sense, Hegel's conceptualization of modernity is simultaneously the first immanent critique of modernity.

Habermas traces the development of Hegel's attempt to reconcile the contradictions of modernity through successive stages of his thought. In his early theological writings, developed alongside his Tübingen seminary friends Friedrich Schelling and Friedrich Hölderlin, Hegel appealed to a purified public faith and civil religiosity as a bond to reconcile the fragmented segments of modern society. He countered both the dogmatism of established religion and the abstractness of Enlightenment rationalism with a vision of an ethical totality (sittliche Totalität) rooted in the lived experience of community, and articulated a "causality of destiny" that framed reconciliation as the recognition of self-injury in the harm done to others (Habermas, 1987, p.41). Yet Habermas argues that this early vision of reconciliation was fatally flawed: it relied on pre-modern forms of life, idealized from the Greek polis and early Christian communities, that modernity's own reflective logic had rendered irrecoverable (Habermas, 1987, pp.42-43).

Hegel quickly abandoned the aesthetic solution to modernity's divisions outlined in the so-called "oldest system program," which had attributed the work of reconciliation to artistic imagination, following the lead of Friedrich Schiller. For Hegel, given modernity's foundation in critical reflection and subjectivity, only philosophical reason—a thought that moves within subjective reflection while also transcending its limits—could achieve genuine reconciliation. This insight led to Hegel's conception of absolute spirit. For Hegel, absolute spirit is not a static metaphysical entity, but the dynamic, self-mediating process of the relation between finitude and infinity, the "unconditionally self-productive self-relation" that overcomes all finite absolutisms and positivities (Habermas, 1987,

p.46). Crucially, Habermas emphasizes that Hegel does not abandon the principle of subjectivity here; instead, he deploys the philosophy of subjectivity with the very aim of overcoming subject-centered reason. The mature Hegel criticizes the defects of modernity without appealing to any premise outside the immanent principle of modern subjectivity itself (Habermas, 1987, p.46).

This immanent self-transcendence of modernity is also central to Hegel's political philosophy, particularly his account of the modern state in the *Philosophy of Right*. Hegel's key innovation here is his formulation of civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) as a distinct domain, differentiated from and mediating between the family and the state. Civil society, for Hegel, is the sphere of private interest and market exchange, the domain where the principle of subjective freedom unfolds in its distinctively modern form. Habermas notes that Hegel here acknowledges both the progressive advances of modernity and its divisive, atomizing effects: he recognizes that the classical ideal of the polis cannot be restored in modern depoliticized social life, while also retaining his commitment to the ethical totality that he had first thematized in his early writings (Habermas, 1987, p.51). For Hegel, the modern state has "immense strength and depth" in that it allows the principle of subjectivity to unfold to the extreme of individual self-sufficiency, while simultaneously guiding it back into substantive ethical unity (G. W. F. Hegel, 1967, p.161).¹ In this way, Hegel's theory of the state seeks to achieve the self-transcendence of modernity under strictly modern auspices, avoiding both the restoration of pre-modern hierarchy and the unconstrained reign of private interest.

3. Habermas's Critique of Hegel's Account of Modernity

Despite his recognition of Hegel's groundbreaking account of modernity, Habermas argues that Hegel's system is ultimately a failed attempt to

resolve modernity's contradictions. His critique rests on two core, interrelated arguments.

The first line of critique targets Hegel's continued entrapment in the philosophy of the subject. For all his efforts to overcome the limits of subject-centered reason, Habermas argues, Hegel remains hostage to a self-enclosed model of subjectivity. With the concept of absolute spirit, Hegel "regresses behind the intuitions of his youth," conceiving the overcoming of subjectivity only within the bounds of the philosophy of the subject itself (Habermas, 1987, p.33). Hegel's claim that absolute reason can reconcile the divisions of modernity, Habermas contends, is a philosophical sleight of hand: he presupposes, rather than demonstrates, that absolute reason can unify the very divisions that discursive reason must disassemble (Habermas, 1987, p.35). This flaw is equally evident in Hegel's theory of the objective spirit and the modern state. The state can only serve as the site of reconciliation for modernity's divisions if we presuppose an absolute modeled on the self-relation of a cognitive subject. Only when the absolute is framed as infinite subjectivity can universality and particularity be reconciled in the monological self-knowledge of the state—a framework that subordinates the subjective freedom of individuals to the "higher subjectivity" of the state (Habermas, 1987, p.53). For Habermas, this means that Hegel never truly escapes the aporias of subject-centered reason; he merely inflates the subject into an absolute, rather than moving beyond the paradigm of consciousness altogether.

Habermas's second critique focuses on the abstract, contemplative character of Hegel's mature philosophy, which he argues evacuates the critical and practical dimension of his early thought. Retreating into the absoluteness of philosophical system-building, Hegel's reason achieves at best a "partial reconciliation"—one confined to the realm of philosophy itself, divorced from the lived public religiosity and communal ethical life that he had once seen as the core of social unity (Habermas,

¹ G. W. F. Hegel. (1967). *Philosophy of Right*. Trans. T. M. Knox. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 161 (§ 260).

1987, p.56). In his mature system, Hegel's philosophy no longer seeks to criticize and transform existing reality, but only to "grasp reality as it is." This "muffling of critique," Habermas argues, is the direct corollary of the devaluation of actuality by absolute philosophy: the modernity conceptualized in Hegel's system permits a "Stoic retreat" from the concrete struggles and contradictions of real social life (Habermas, 1987, p.57).

As an alternative to Hegel's failed framework, Habermas proposes his well-known model of communicative rationality. In place of the monological self-knowledge of the absolute subject, he turns to the intersubjectivity of uncoerced communicative interaction. Reconciliation between universality and particularity, he argues, cannot be achieved by the higher subjectivity of the state, but only through the "higher intersubjectivity of an uncoerced will formation within a communication community" (Habermas, 1987, p.54). The synthesis that Hegel attributed to absolute reason, Habermas reassigns to the universal, uncoerced consensus achieved between free and equal individuals in communicative action. This model, he contends, escapes the aporias of subject-centered reason by grounding rationality in the intersubjective structure of language, rather than the self-relation of the solitary subject.

4. Rethinking Habermas's Interpretation: A Critical Rejoinder

Habermas's reading of Hegel has been enormously influential in discussions of modernity and remains an important point of reference for later debates (Bernstein, 1985). Even so, some central features of that reading call for reconsideration. This is especially the case with his strong distinction between the early and the mature Hegel, as well as with his presentation of Geist as a figure that ultimately remains confined within the horizon of the philosophy of subjectivity. These interpretive moves do bring out real tensions in Hegel's thought,

but they also risk fixing those tensions in an overly determinate form.

Habermas is right to note that Hegel's intellectual development involves a marked shift in emphasis (Beiser, 2005). The early writings place greater weight on religion, communal ethical life, and forms of reconciliation that have not yet assumed a systematic philosophical shape. The mature works articulate these concerns within a different conceptual register. Still, the contrast should not be drawn too sharply. The later Hegel does not abandon the earlier concern with ethical unity so much as relocate it within a more developed speculative framework (Houlgate, 2005). The place assigned to art, religion, and philosophy in the exposition of absolute spirit, together with the account of ethical life in the Philosophy of Right, suggests that the mature system preserves rather than simply discards decisive elements of the earlier project (Hegel, 1967). On this point, Habermas captures a genuine transformation in Hegel's thought, but presents that transformation in a way that tends to understate the continuity of the project as a whole.²

A related problem appears in Habermas's treatment of Geist. At certain points, Hegelian reason is presented as an intensified form of self-relation, a movement in which subjectivity seeks reconciliation through its own expanded activity. At other points, Hegel's mature position is characterized as if spirit had congealed into a contemplative order detached from the critical movement that first animated it (Habermas, 1987). This contrast allows Habermas to explain why Hegel both radicalizes and neutralizes the principle of subjectivity. Yet the contrast is rendered in terms that are too rigid (Stern, 2009). It makes Hegel appear suspended between two one-sided determinations that his own philosophy is explicitly meant to mediate (Habermas, 1987, p.46). Hegel's concept of Geist is not adequately grasped through either of these determinations taken in isolation. Geist is neither a self-producing subject nor a fixed objective principle standing over against

² Hegel. (1967). *Philosophy of Right*, pp. 165–174 (§ 270).

subjectivity (Stern, 2009). It names a speculative structure within which subjectivity and objectivity are both differentiated and reconciled (Pippin, 1989). The movement from subjective spirit to objective spirit and absolute spirit should therefore not be understood as a linear sequence of self-production, nor as a transition from activity to mere contemplation (Hegel, 2011). It designates the process through which spirit comes to itself by passing through these moments without being exhausted by any one of them. Read in this way, Geist cannot be identified with sheer subjective productivity, but neither can it be reduced to an inert order of objective rationality. Habermas does identify a real tension in Hegel's system, but his formulation does not fully account for the speculative unity within which that tension is meant to be aufgehoben. (Martin, 1980; Pippin, 1989; Stern, 2009)

If this line of reading is plausible, then Habermas's first criticism of Hegel requires a more qualified formulation. His objection does bring into view a genuine difficulty in Hegel's attempt to reconcile reflection, freedom, and ethical unity. Yet that difficulty cannot be fully captured by the claim that Hegel merely elevates the structure of subjectivity into an absolute subject (Habermas, 1987). Such a formulation isolates one aspect of the problem, but leaves out the extent to which spirit, in Hegel's own presentation, is intended to move beyond the opposition between subject and object rather than simply reproduce it at a higher level.

Habermas's turn to communicative rationality is best understood as an attempt to avoid what he takes to be the central weakness of Hegel's solution to modernity (Habermas, 1984). If reconciliation is vested in the self-mediation of absolute spirit or in the ethical unity embodied by the state, then the risk remains that intersubjective plurality will be subordinated to a higher totality. Habermas seeks to resist precisely this outcome. He relocates the possibility of rational reconciliation from the self-knowledge of spirit to processes of communication

among free and equal participants. In this respect, his position is not simply an affirmation of individual particularity against ethical life. It is an effort to preserve universality in a form that no longer depends on a substantive conception of collective unity (Seyla Benhabib & Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves, 1997).³

Even so, this shift does not fully overcome the difficulty that Habermas attributes to Hegel. In separating the validity of rational will-formation from the stronger ethical substance of *Sittlichkeit*, Habermas secures greater room for plurality, but he also weakens the account of how freedom acquires concrete institutional form. From a Hegelian perspective, freedom cannot be understood as the outcome of procedures of agreement alone. It requires objective embodiment in institutions, practices, and forms of life in which the individual no longer confronts the universal as an external limit. For this reason, Habermas's model risks preserving the formal conditions of rational agreement while leaving insufficiently explained the thicker ethical conditions under which such agreement becomes socially actual.⁴

This difficulty also bears on Habermas's account of the public sphere and the lifeworld. His theory rightly emphasizes that rational legitimacy cannot be grounded in monological consciousness or imposed unity. Yet the communicative framework tends to treat shared forms of life primarily as background conditions for discourse, rather than as moments of ethical actuality internal to freedom itself. From this angle, the appeal to an unconstrained communication community does not so much escape the abstractness of reflective philosophy as relocate it. What appears as an alternative to Hegelian totality may therefore remain vulnerable to a different kind of abstraction: universality is preserved at the level of discursive validity, but its reconciliation with the institutional and ethical substance of social life is left unresolved. On this point, Habermas's alternative does not

³ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 156 (§ 258).

⁴ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 156–157 (§ 258).

simply reverse Hegel's difficulty, but reproduces it in a transformed register.

5. Conclusion

Hegel occupies a unique and foundational place in the philosophical discourse of modernity. As Habermas rightly recognizes, he was the first philosopher to grasp modernity as a distinct philosophical problem, to confront its fundamental ambivalence, and to attempt an immanent reconciliation of its contradictions without abandoning the core emancipatory aspirations of the Enlightenment. Habermas's reading of Hegel offers profound insights into the tensions at the heart of Hegel's system, and his critique of subject-centered reason has reshaped contemporary debates about modernity.

Yet, as this paper has argued, Habermas's interpretation of Hegel is marked by fundamental distortions. His sharp split between young and mature Hegel obscures the continuity of Hegel's

project, while his dual portrayal of Hegelian reason as either pure subjective activity or passive contemplation misrepresents the ontological meaning of Geist. His proposed alternative of communicative rationality, meanwhile, fails to escape the aporias of modern philosophy that he identifies, and falls back into positions that Hegel himself had already decisively criticized.

The contemporary crisis of the modern project does not allow for a simple return to Hegel's system, nor for a facile dismissal of his insights. As Habermas's work makes clear, we cannot evade the questions that Hegel first posed about modernity's contradictions. But neither can we chart a path beyond Hegel by simplifying or distorting his thought. Any viable response to the dilemmas of contemporary modernity must begin with a rigorous, nuanced engagement with the depth of Hegel's philosophical achievement—an achievement that remains the touchstone for all subsequent debates about the fate of the modern project.

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