Background to Hegel's Philosophy of History

Dominant Tendencies in Late 18\textsuperscript{th} Century German Thought \[1]\ast

There was a strong reaction among German intellectuals of the late 18\textsuperscript{th} century to mainstream (French) Enlightenment thought. Hegel's work grew out of two important aspects of this reaction which came to be known as Romanticism.

\textbf{Expressivism [Herder]}

The German response arose in opposition to positivistic and utilitarian aspects of the Enlightenment thinking about the human being "as both subject and object of an objectifying scientific analysis. The focus of objection was against a view of man as the subject of egoistic desires, for which nature and society provided merely the means to fulfillment". \[1\]

Greater emphasis was placed on the (aesthetic) unity of life and its holistic and thematic nature. "Herder and others developed an alternative notion of man whose dominant image was rather that of an expressive object. Human life was seen as having a unity rather analogous to that of a work of art, where every part or aspect only found its proper meaning in relation to all the others….To see a human being as in some way compounded of different elements: faculties of reason and sensibility, or soul and body, or reason and feeling, was to lose sight of the living, expressive unity…" \[1f\]

On this view, the highest fulfillment is reached in a life lived as an expressive activity. This is in contrast with science which not only distorts the unity of life but also isolates the individual from society. \[2\]

\textbf{Communities} are also expressive and not simply instrumental means for fulfilling individual goals. Human culture expresses itself in characteristic communities of people.

Each people and each individual has its own form or unity to realize. (This marks the beginning of a modern sense of nationalism.)

The human being is also continuous with nature, not separate from it.

\textbf{Moral Freedom}

Kant's radically free moral subjectivity and the a priori binding nature of moral law was another important reaction against the objectifying tendencies in utilitarian thinking. "If man was to be treated as another piece of objectified nature, whether in introspection or external observation, then his motivation would have to be explained causally like all other events. Those who accepted this view argue that this was not incompatible with freedom, for was not one free in being motivated by one's own desire, however caused?" \[3\] [This was the view defended by Hobbes and others known as "compatibilism". See also "Kant's Moral Theory".]

Freedom arises from the self-determining nature of the free moral will outside of nature and causality and independent of desire and inclination. But this freedom is purchased at a cost -- the separation of Reason and Nature. \[6\] Thus, it became necessary to find a way of uniting the expressive unity of life with moral freedom.
The Attempt to Unify Expression and Freedom

German intellectuals called upon History to reconcile the ancient and the modern and unite expression and freedom. [8] They looked to the Greeks as a culture that embodied a unity of nature and human expression. But they considered it to be an incomplete -- naïve and unconscious -- unity. Thus, the split between man and nature that occurs in the modern world was seen as a necessary sacrifice in order for reason to develop and for a higher, self-conscious unity to emerge. This distinction between the natural and the fully-developed, self-conscious unity was described by the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin in the following way:


There are two ideals of our existence: one is a condition of the greatest simplicity, where our needs accord with each other, with our powers and with everything we are related to, just through the organization of nature, without any action on our part. The other is a condition of the highest cultivation, where this accord would come about between infinitely diversified and strengthened needs and powers, through the organization which we are able to give to ourselves. [Hölderlin, Hyperion Fragment.]

In addition to their acknowledging the value of a temporary historical split between the human being and nature, German romantics also felt the strong need to overcome oppositions (symptomatic of their urge to unify).

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<th>Oppositions to be Overcome</th>
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Hegel's "solution" was that Nature and Spirit must be one. [9] Charles Taylor summarizes Hegel's position and distinguishes it from other forms of Romanticism in the following way:

1. "[T]he view of this generation, which it drew from Herder and Goethe, was not a simple pantheism but rather a variant of the Renaissance idea of man the microcosm. Man is not merely a part of the universe; in another way he reflects the whole: the spirit which expresses itself in the external reality of nature comes to conscious expression in man." Thus, there was a commitment to the notion of man as a microcosm, with the whole contained in each of the parts. [10]

2. But man can not be understood as merely reflecting the larger order already present in the universe and still be radically free. Man must be creative and complete and play an instrumental role in perfecting the order of nature.

3. "So…while nature tends to realize spirit, that is, self-consciousness, man as a conscious being tends towards a grasp of nature in which he will see it as spirit and as one with his own spirit…. And hence men can achieve at once the greatest unity with nature, that is, with the
spirit which unfolds itself in nature, and the fullest autonomous self-expression. The two must come together since man's basic identity is as vehicle of spirit." [11; emphases added.]

4. Thus, for Hegel, man is the indispensable vehicle of Spirit as consciousness, rationality, and will; and Spirit is also the underlying reality with purposes and will of its own.

What distinguishes this Hegelian synthesis from standard forms of Romanticism is that Hegel insists that the unity of freedom and expression be achieved through Reason rather than intuition or feeling. Reason and rational understanding are the basis of self-determining freedom. For Hegel, to return to intuition would be to return to the original unity of the Greeks. So the main difference comes down to the path taken to reach the goal. [11f]

But how can reason be understood as unifying rather than merely analytic and divisive; as escaping "the oscillation of Romantic thought between a semi-pantheistic abandonment in communion with nature, history or God on one extreme, and an acute sense of the solitary fate of the subject in a God-forsaken world on the other"? The answer requires examination of a number of key concepts.

**Hegel's Proposed Unity of Freedom and Expression** [16]
The embodied historical subject is the realization of a certain form and the clarification of that form, i.e. the self-realization or definition.

This theory of self-realization is anti-dualistic. [17]

1. It incorporates Aristotle's notion of life as inseparable from its material embodiment while exhibiting purposiveness and a kind of intelligence.
2. Dualism, on the other hand, places intelligence in a disembodied mind, while conceiving of nature (body) in purely mechanistic, causal terms. [Descartes]
3. Hegel's theory also adds a Judeo-Christian notion of will as expressive, a notion foreign to ancient Greek thought.

Thus, man is both a rational animal -- a thinker -- and an expressive being whose thinking is always in a medium which affects the content of the thought as it is translated from one form to another. Human consciousness is continuous with life. [18] One can think of this by analogy with language as an expressive medium, where form and content are not entirely distinct, and within which a certain type of experience takes place. In contrast with dualism, thought is taken out of the disembodied mind and externalized.

"Thus expressivist theory as a marriage of hylomorphism [the notion that matter is as important as form] and the new view of expression is radically anti-dualistic. And so was Hegel's theory of the subject. It was a basic principle of Hegel's thought that the subject and all his functions, however 'spiritual', were inescapably embodied; and this in two related dimensions: as a 'rational animal', that is, a living being who thinks; and as an expressive being, that is, a being whose thinking always and necessarily expresses itself in a medium." [18]

This view suggests both continuities and discontinuities in life. "Man as a living being is not radically different from other animals, but at the same time he is not just an animal plus reason;
he is a quite new totality; and that means he has to be understood on quite different principles. Hence along with the idea of continuity we have that of a hierarchy of level of being. We can speak of a hierarchy here and not just different types, because the 'higher' ones can be seen as realizing to a greater degree what the lower ones embody imperfectly. Hegel holds to such a hierarchy of being which reaches its apex in conscious subjectivity. Lower kinds of life exhibit proto-forms, as it were, of subjectivity; for they show in ascending degree purpose, self-maintenance as life forms, knowledge of what surrounds them. They become in short more and more like agents…. Hegel extends this hierarchy…beyond living beings to the whole of creation. We can see a hierarchy among inanimate phenomena which points to the higher stage of life, just as animals point beyond to human subjectivity. Thus just as the living is a proto-form of consciousness, so the unity of, say, the solar system is to be seen as a proto-form of the living." [19]

This hierarchy is represented in the following chart.

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                   Unity of Consciousness
                      ↓                           ↓
                    Unity of Living Beings
                    (proto-form of consc.)
                      ↓                           ↓
                   Unity of the Solar System
                   (proto-form of the living)
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Further complications arise for Hegel because of the introduction of certain Kantian elements to his scheme. Because rational thought is at odds with desire, there is a sense in which man is at odds with himself. [20] The attempt to gain freedom through the self-sufficiency of rational thought tends to separate man from nature and thus opposes man's rational being to life. This is a kind of contradiction and split within the very nature of man. We need to be engaged in life to think; but, thinking by its very nature separates itself from the spontaneous and natural in us. Thus, a division occurs where the was once a unity.

"Developed rationality and hence discord is not something man starts with, but something he comes to. And this means two things: first, beyond the hierarchy of forms of life there is a hierarchy of modes of thought. As man's rational consciousness of himself grows, so his mode of expression of this self-consciousness must alter. His language, art, religion and philosophy must change; for thought cannot alter without a transformation of its medium. Thus there must be a hierarchy of modes of expression in which the higher make possible a more exact, lucid and coherent thought than the lower." [20; emphases added.]

Let's stand back for a moment and try to clarify Hegel's notion of the subject. "The thinking rational subject can only exist embodied. In this sense we can truly say that the subject is his embodiment, that for example I as a thinking being am my living body. And yet at the same
time this embodiment in life has a tendency to carry us along the stream of inclination, of impulse towards unreflecting unity within ourselves and with nature. Reason has to struggle against this in order to realize itself. And in this sense his embodiment is not only other than the thinking rational subject, but in a sense his opposite, his limit, his opponent. Thus we can say that the subject is both identical with and opposed to his embodiment. This can be because the subject is not defined by Hegel in one dimension, as it were, as a being with certain properties, but in two. He has certain conditions of existence, those of embodiment; but at the same time the subject is characterized teleologically, as tending towards a certain perfection, that of reason and freedom, and this is in line with both Aristotle and expressivist theory." [21] The description and understanding of this growth over time is History.

The Absolute and Subject [23]
That which underlies and manifests itself in all reality is Spirit. But Spirit is necessarily embodied; it cannot exist separate from the universe which it sustains and through which it manifests itself.

Thus, Hegel's conception of Spirit is based on an Aristotelian notion of
  1. a life-form which is not separate from a body (matter), and
  2. the expression of a thought that requires a medium.

Both of these come together in the notion of a mode of life that expresses what I am as this particular historical being.

Thus, there are two aspects or dimensions necessary for understanding human beings:
  1. Life-function -- that which is necessary for life, nourishment, reproduction, etc.
  2. Cultural expression -- incorporating definitions of role, value, aspiration, success, failure, fairness, etc.

In human life, the two do not overlap entirely. Some aspects of man are understood simply as life-function, e.g., digestion. But in Spirit, the two aspects coincide. Thus, the universe is the embodiment of the life-functions of Spirit as well as its expression. The universe must be understood in terms of an internal teleology and as a "text" in which the Spirit expresses its nature. It is like a design without an independent designer. [The internal teleology is, in a fundamental sense, the necessity that Spirit be fully realized in self-consciousness and, hence, free.]

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