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Thimo Heisenberg

Bryn Mawr College, theisenber@brynmawr.edu

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Death in Berlin. Hegel on Mortality and the Social Order.

Abstract. It is widely acknowledged that Hegel holds the view that a rational social order needs to reconcile us to our status as natural beings, with bodily needs and desires. But while this general view is well-known, one of its most surprising implications is rarely explored: namely the implication that, for Hegel, a rational social order also has to reconcile us to the inevitable fate of everything natural and organic – it needs to *reconcile ourselves to our own mortality*. This paper explains this largely unknown dimension of Hegel’s view, as well as its implications for contemporary social philosophy. The main contemporary upshot is going to be that Hegel’s argument can be read as presenting the case for a ‘politics of mortality’: for a type of social critique that holds society to the standard of how easy it makes it for social members to face death with a reconciled attitude.

Keywords. G.W.F. Hegel, 19th century German philosophy, Mortality, Samuel Scheffler, David Velleman

I. Introduction

It is frequently acknowledged that Hegel thinks that a rational social order needs to reconcile us to our status as natural beings, with certain bodily needs and desires¹. Indeed, Hegel argues that, within a rational social order, social members learn in a familial space that these needs and desires are nothing to be ashamed of (e.g. PR § 163Z²) – such that they then come to freely express, and positively affirm, these desires when they go forth to satisfy their material needs within the sphere of work and labour (e.g. PR § 207). That way, to put it in more abstract terminology, Hegel’s rational society is a space in which our ‘first nature’ is elevated to a higher, ethical level, and shown not to be an inevitable obstacle for us (the ‘prison’ of our physical body, as it were), but rather something that we can freely affirm as good.

But while this general view is well-known, one of its most surprising implications is rarely discussed: namely the implication that, for Hegel, a rational social order has to have the task of

¹ This view is, for example, helpfully explored by Frederick Neuhouser (Neuhouser, *Hegel’s Social Theory*, esp. 153-154) or by Dudley Knowles (Knowles, *Hegel and the Philosophy of Right*, Ch. 10). Recently, especially Gal Katz has forcefully brought these kinds of issues into relief and into the focus of Hegel scholarship (Katz, “On What is Alive (and What is Dead) in Hegel’s Account of Marriage”).

² In this paper, I cite Hegel’s works in the way indicated in the bibliography. All translations are my own, although I have profited from consulting the Nisbet translation of the *Philosophy of Right*.

reconciling us to the fact that we share in the ultimate fate of everything natural and organic i.e. that we will die and pass away. Indeed, Hegel alerts the reader rather clearly to this implication of his view: not only does he, early on in his discussion of rational ethical life, identify “physical death (*physischer Tod*)” (PR 151Z) as one of the things that rational ethical life will help us, in some sense, overcome – but he also adds later that “everything that is finite is mortal and transitory (*sterblich und vergänglich*). But in rational ethical life, in the state, nature is deprived of this coercive force (*wird der Natur diese Gewalt abgenommen*)” (PR § 324). And, of course, ‘depriving nature of this coercive force’ here does not mean that rational ethical life will make us *literally* immortal (which might not even be such a desirable thing³), but rather that – within a rational social order – the reality of our physical death is transformed in such a way that our mortality does not longer appear as a coercion, but rather as something that we can, to some extent, freely affirm (Ibid.).

The purpose of this paper is to explain this relatively unknown dimension of Hegel’s view and to draw out its contemporary implications. In the first part, I discuss Hegel’s rational state as he presents it in the *Philosophy of Right* and show how all its different spheres (including the economic, public and political spheres) make a distinct contribution to preparing its members for death. In presenting this view, as I argue in the second part, Hegel implicitly makes a case for a type of social critique that holds society to the standard of how easy it makes it for social members to face death with a reconciled attitude – a type of social critique that is still relevant today.

Before I begin with all this, let me, however, prevent a misunderstanding. No part of the argument should be read as suggesting that, for Hegel, the rational social order is the *only* place in which individuals are offered some reconciliation to their own mortality. As we would probably

³ Bernard Williams’ discussion of the tedium of immortality is pertinent here (Williams, “The Makropulos case,” 82-100).

expect, Hegel holds the view that it is in *religion* – i.e. particularly in ‘true’ religion i.e. in Christianity⁴ (e.g. Rel II, 297) – that we are offered ways to cope with our own death, as well as in *philosophy* (which even before Hegel had been thought of as the art of ‘learning how to die’⁵). But precisely because these views, as well as the fact that Hegel holds them, are well-known, and in some sense unsurprising, I will leave them largely to the side for the purposes of this investigation. Instead I aim to bring to light Hegel’s view that reconciliation to our mortality is *not* only the task of philosophy and religion, but rather also the task of a well-structured social world (as well as a standard to which we ultimately should be able to hold it). It is *this* part of Hegel’s view on reconciliation and death – its social and political side – that has been undeservedly neglected and that seems, therefore, worth unpacking here.

II. Death in Hegel’s rational state

In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel sketches his conception of a rational social order (PR § 142-360). As we have already seen above, it is *here* that Hegel asserts that it is part of the function of such a social order to overcome the “physical death” (PR 151Z) of its members and to “deprive nature” of the coercive force of death by reconciling members to their mortality (PR § 324). In doing so, the rational social order makes good on its more general promise to be a place in which “all natural limits are not in existence (*alle natürlichen Beschränkungen nicht vorhanden sind*)” (VPR Hoppe 147, cf. also PR § 149): not, of course, because social members literally cease to die, but rather because, once reconciled to their mortality, natural finitude does not longer appear as a coercive ‘limit’ to social members, but rather as something that they can freely embrace.

⁴ For a helpful discussion of the reconciliation to death as Hegel sees it happen in religion, see – for example – Dieter Wandschneider’ discussion (Wandschneider, “Schmerz der Negativität”).

⁵ Indeed, this ancient line of thought has been famously revived in Montaigne’s *Essais*, particularly essay 19.

Now, of course, because Hegel uses the term ‘death’ in multiple ways, we need to proceed cautiously⁶. The meaning pertinent to the present argument, as the above description might already intimate, is literal or ‘*physical death*’ (PR § 151Z) i.e. the demise of our natural organism, through which our particular existence is extinguished (e.g. Enc II § 367). This contrasts, in Hegel’s writings, with what he calls, less literally, “spiritual death (*geistiger Tod*)”⁷ (PR § 151Z): a state in which a person has become so deeply “habituated into (*eingewohnt*)” (PR § 151Z) their social role that they have become “mentally numb (*geistig stumpf*)” (Ibid.) towards it, discharging its constituent duties only mechanically. If such spiritual death becomes a wide-spread phenomenon, as Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* reveal, it can have dire consequences for the social order as a whole, leading to its demise and disappearance from the stream of history (VPG, 99-101).

Nevertheless, what is at stake in the present argument is not spiritual death, but rather its physical and more literal counterpart. We are asking the question how Hegel can make good on his promise that physical death, as one and maybe the most salient of our “natural limits” (VPR Hoppe 147) can be overcome, and nature thereby deprived of some of its coercive power (PR § 324), such that social members recover from their “natural and contingent circumstances [...] the infinity of [their] will” (VPR Wannemann 90) i.e. their freedom.

Given our ordinary intuitions on this subject, we might initially expect Hegel to assign this task primarily or even exclusively to the rational family (PR § 158-181), which constitutes the first and the most immediate sphere of Hegel’s rational social order. After all: we normally think of the preparation for death as an intensely private and personal process that has little role to play in

⁶ I would like to thank an anonymous referee for prompting this important clarification.

⁷ My explication of this term is indebted to Andreja Novakovic (Novakovic, *Hegel on Second Nature*, 64-68).

professional or in public life. Indeed, it is not even clear how something seemingly unrelated like e.g. the economic practices of Civil Society or the political institutions of the state *could* have an impact on how we relate to death: these practices and institutions seem to be concerned with organizing individual's lives, but appear to have little bearing on how they face death.

Surprisingly, however, Hegel's view goes in a significantly different direction. If we read his whole description of the rational social order from the vantage point of death, it turns out that Hegel thinks that *all* spheres of his rational society – including economic, public and political practices – have a significant role to play in preparing its members for the confrontation with their own mortality. In the following, I will, hence, trace the argumentative thread of death through the family, Civil Society and the state, showing how Hegel thinks these institutions are implicated in 'depriving nature' of the coercive force of finitude.

(a) *Death and the family: the pains of dying*

In order to understand what specific role Hegel attributes to the family in reconciling social members to their mortality, we need to take a step back and briefly think about the main obstacles that prevent such a reconciliation under ordinary circumstances: namely our different fears of death. The most immediate of these kinds of fears – albeit not the only one, as we will soon see – is the fear of the physical and psychological pains that come with the organic process of dying. After all: as the kind of organic beings that we are, our bodies will slowly but inevitably break down in their regular functioning (cf. e.g. Enc. III § 396+Z): exposing us, in this process, to ever increasing physical discomforts (from hurting joints to failing eye sight) and psychologically painful mental failings (forgetfulness, increasing lack of intellectual acuity etc.) – all of which are, in ordinary cases, irreversible and ominously looming over the end of our lives.

It is with this immediate fear of the organic process of dying, and of the attendant pains, that – in Hegel’s rational social order – the family can help. This, indeed, is an implication of Hegel’s general claim that the family is the place in rational ethical life where members, particularly the married couple, can live out the process of the genus (*Gattungsprozess*) (PR § 161) in a unity of mutual support and love. Now, of course, this general reference to the *Gattungsprozess* is usually interpreted as the view that, within a healthy marriage, its participants can live out and cherish their respective *sexuality* in a unity of support and recognition⁸. And, undoubtedly, *sexuality* is one of the central aspects that Hegel has in mind when he claims that the rational family offers support for the *Gattungsprozess* to be lived out and for our “naturalness to be overcome” (VPR Henrich, 131) such that what is initially a ‘merely’ natural process is given an ethical function – otherwise, Hegel would not so deliberately present the family, and particularly marriage, as an ethically elevated “*Geschlechtsverhältnis*” (PR § 161Z), with *Geschlecht* in German not only denoting gender, but also sexual organs⁹.

But it is often neglected – yet for our purposes decisive – that Hegel’s notion of *Gattungsprozess* always also encompasses the physical process of dying and passing away (e.g. Enc I § 221Z, Enc II § 367). Indeed, in the discussion of *Gattungsprozess* in the Encyclopaedia logic and the philosophy of nature – which Hegel explicitly references in his discussion of the familial unity in PR § 161 – Hegel describes the *Gattungsprozess* as crucially involving, as its very last ‘act’, the organic “death of the individual” (Enc II § 367Z), in which “the species proves its

⁸ Classic discussions of this matter can be found e.g. in Neuhouser, *Hegel’s Social Theory*, 169-170, in Knowles, *Hegel and the Philosophy of Right*, 247-252, in Bockenheimer, *Hegels Familien und Geschlechtertheorie* as well as in Katz, “Hegel on Shame and Sexual Recognition”.

⁹ Nisbet’s translation of *Geschlechtsverhältnis* simply with “sexual relationship” eliminates, probably for lack of a better alternative, this dual meaning with which Hegel plays here.

power over the immediate individual” (Enc I § 221Z) and the corporeal existence of the individual comes to a processual end.

Hence, by saying that the family is the place in which the *Gattungsprozess* finds support and love, Hegel is not only designating the family as the ethical space for sex, but also as the ethical space for the organic process of dying. The duties of mutual aid within the family (e.g. VPR Henrich 130, VPR Ringier 96) – i.e. the duties that ensue from the fact that “[within the family] my interest is the immediate interest and duty of the other” (VPR Wannemann 99) – must therefore, on Hegel’s view, include duties of care that ease the mental and physical pain at the end of one’s life.

But how *exactly* does the family address our fear of the pains of dying? Hegel imagines two ways. The first is relatively obvious: family members can help each other alleviate pain and discomfort directly *as it actually arises*. This alleviation can, presumably, take itself a physical form (we might e.g. imagine family members aiding their elders with changing bandages etc.), but it can take a psychological form as well. Indeed, Hegel’s insistence that family members share their “whole individual existence (*Gemeinsamkeit der ganzen individuellen Existenz*)” (PR § 163) suggests that family members will alleviate each other’s pain, to a significant degree, *by sharing it* i.e. by providing empathetic understanding for what the other is going through.

Secondly, Hegel thinks that family members can alleviate (some of) each other’s pain, especially the psychological pain, indirectly by *keeping it from even arising in the first place*. The argument here is this: just as with most of the psychological difficulties that surround the *Gattungsprozess*, these psychological pains, for the most part, take the form of shame¹⁰ (e.g. PR § 163Z) i.e. they consist in the sinking feeling that we fall short of a norm that we hold ourselves to

¹⁰ For a much more thorough discussion of the notion of shame in Hegel, see also Katz, “Hegel on Shame and Sexual Recognition”.

(Enc. III § 401Z): Forgetting something in our old age, for example, is painful, just because we don't take ourselves to be the kind of person that forgets etc.

Family members, however, can break this detrimental psychological nexus, Hegel thinks. They do so, Hegel argues, by providing each other with a form of recognition that is independent of whether we measure up to certain expectations and norms: in the family, “I have worth by being what I am immediately” (VPR Henrich, 148) and without any achievement (cf. also: “Parents love their children, and vice versa, even if they are ever so corrupt” (VPR Ringier, 113)). And this form of being loved in an unconditional way can ultimately come to influence my own relationship to myself: if others are able to love me unconditionally, I can learn to do this as well – thereby untethering my self-worth from the fulfilment of norms and, in this way, inoculating myself against shame. Indeed, it is this dynamic that prompts Hegel to say that “in marriage we speak without blushing about natural events, which, outside of marriage, would prompt the feeling of shame” (PR § 163Z): since it is in marriage, and presumably in the rational family at large, that we come to be protected against the feeling of shame through the type of love characteristic of it.

Taking these thoughts together, then, we can say that the family helps us cope with the pain of dying, both as it arises and by keeping it from arising in the first place. Before we move on, however, it is worth explicitly noting that there is an argumentative route here which, surprisingly, Hegel – as far as I can see – does not put into the foreground of his argument¹¹: namely to say that the rational family helps social members cope with death by giving them the chance to raise children that will perpetuate their values etc. after their death. On such a view, the family would

¹¹ This raises the question whether Hegel, then, thinks there is absolutely *no* place for legacy formation within the family. My sense – but this is not a particularly obvious aspect of the text – is that this is not quite true. Hegel *does* recognize the work that goes on within the household – on his misogynistic view a work that is primarily carried out by women (PR § 171) – as a type of work, and in that way, it probably gives individuals the chance to leave ‘something behind’ in the products of their labour (in the general sense in which I describe this in section (b) below).

help social members overcome the threat of death not only by helping social members to overcome the pain of dying, but also by giving them a chance to leave some form of legacy behind in the form of their children, through whose lives their parents still ‘live on’ even after their death.

My suggestion why this line of argument does not play a bigger role in Hegel’s discussion is this: Hegel is worried that thinking of children as a kind of personal ‘legacy’ will far too easily lead us to think of our children as *projects through which our own self* should come to expression, rather than thinking of them as actual people that should develop their own independent sense of self. Indeed, throughout his whole discussion of child-rearing in the *Philosophy of Right* (PR § 173-180), Hegel is deeply worried that parents might develop, if ever so subconsciously, a *selfish view* of childcare, on which those children have an ever increasing part of their value just in terms of what they do for their parents (PR § 174Z). Such an instrumental view of children, Hegel contends here, is not only wrong in itself, but also subverts and undermines the true goal of childrearing – namely “to elevate them from the from the natural immediacy, in which they originally exist, to independence and free personality” (PR § 175). And it is against the background of *this* part of Hegel’s view that we should understand him de-emphasizing the idea of children as vehicles of a personal legacy. Indeed, for Hegel, as we will now see, thinking of one’s children as vehicles of a personal legacy amounts to confusing the parent-child-relationship with a relationship of exchange that is typical for Civil Society.

(b) *Death and the economic sphere: a personal afterlife in production and property*

Of course, out of the bundle of worries that constitute the fear of death, our fear of the pains of dying, which is addressed in the family, is only one part. Another, and maybe even more salient, part is the fear that, after our death, we will no longer be remembered by others or make an even

if ever so faint ‘difference’ in the lives of those still living. The fear here, it seems, is a fear of fading into the fog of the historical past, without something still carrying forward a part of ourselves – a legacy – that continues to play a role in the lives of others, even if only in their conscious memory. This fear, as one might easily argue, is behind many attempts to ‘immortalize’ oneself e.g. in certain personal projects (such as founding a school in one’s name, creating a signature work of art etc.) as well as behind the almost stereotypical last wish not ever to be forgotten by one’s loved ones or by future generations.

It is *this* fear that, in Hegel’s rational state, the economic sphere – which Hegel refers to as the ‘system of needs’ (PR § 189) – helps us address. Indeed, Hegel distinguishes two ways in which it does this. The first way, according to Hegel, is by allowing its participants to leave behind a legacy in the products of their labour (PR § 187A). Indeed, Hegel thinks that, if the conditions of production are right, the things that people make – the chair they constructed, the building they planned, the book they wrote – can figure as representations of their productive will, which “embosses its signature (*sein Siegel aufdrücken*)” (PR § 187A, cf. PR § 56) on them, thereby allowing their agency to acquire a kind of self-standingness that exceeds the bounds of the individuals’ life and continues to shape the world after their death¹².

It is hard to deny, I think, that there is something intuitive to this connection Hegel draws on here. Indeed, it seems true that, under the right conditions of production, the things that we make allow our will to, as Hegel writes in another passage, “cease to be limited to my presence in

¹² This part of Hegel’s argument makes his notorious view that women should be primarily constrained to the household particularly noxious, by his own lights. Of course, as I already stressed in fn. 14, Hegel recognized domestic labour as labour and therefore would probably want to argue that women can at last ‘immortalize themselves’ – along the lines described above – in their creation of a domestic life and world. Yet, from our contemporary perspective, this line of argument cannot be nearly sufficient or satisfying. There can indeed be no question that Hegel, by the lights of his own argument as reconstructed above, excludes women in significant ways from having the opportunity to make legacies for themselves, thereby overcoming the challenges of their own mortality.

this space and in this time (hört auf, auf meine Gegenwart in diesem Raum und in dieser Zeit beschränkt zu sein)” (PR § 56), such that we continue to shape people’s lives even if we are not around. Hegel, as the student notes to his lectures reveal, also illustrated this thought to his students by talking about the inventors of the traditional plough (VPR Henrich 160/161): these original inventors of the plough might be long dead and their names and particular identities forgotten, and yet their will is still – in some sense – “preserved throughout all generations” (Ibid.), insofar as we still rely on their invention, suitably modified, in our own contemporary practices of agriculture. In the plough, a part of them survives.

Now, of course one might wonder how this line of thought here can be reconciled with the idea of a highly developed division of labour in the modern economy, which Hegel himself seems to recognize (e.g. PR § 198 and *passim*). After all: in a divided labour process the *actual contribution* that my will makes to the product is fairly minimal (one could think in this context of Adam Smith’s famed example of the pin-factory, which Hegel himself frequently rehearsed for his own students (e.g. VPR Wannenmann 118, VPR Henrich 159, cf. PR § 189A¹³)). Given this marginal contribution, one might then think that in a world of highly divided labour we become systematically unable to recognize the products of the production process as our own legacy, and as ways of extending our own agency even beyond our own physical presence.

While there is clearly something correct in this worry – I will return to this point in my discussion of ‘abstraction’ in the next section of this paper – Hegel’s initial response here would be to say that, at least in a *rational* Civil Society, production processes will be structured such that workers can identify with *the other participants* of the production process, such that a kind of

¹³ For an analysis specifically of Hegel’s discussion of Adam Smith’s famous example of ‘pin manufacturing,’ see Waszek, “Adam Smith and Hegel on the Pin Factory”. For a more general exploration of Hegel’s relationship to Adam Smith, see J.P. Henderson and J.B. Davis, “Adam Smith’s Influence on Hegel”.

corporate ‘we’ emerges: a ‘we’, which, then, in turn makes it possible for an individual worker to still feel that the product of the process is *their own* in a meaningful way. To put this in another way: by having relations of production structured such that workers can relevantly identify with their co-workers as a *collective agent* (‘We are Mercedes-Benz’, ‘We are Bosch’ etc.) – whatever product ensues from the process will still feel as a legacy, even if one’s own will, individually considered, is only one of the many factors that contributed to the coming-to-be of the product.

But there is yet another way, in which the economic sphere of Hegel’s rational state helps its members, in some sense, to ‘survive death’. This second way does not pertain to the practices of production, but rather to the reverse: to the practices of consumption. Hegel’s line of thought here can be made perspicuous in the following way: first, it seems pretty clear that by making choices what to buy – and by making choices what to sell – we are slowly but steadily building up a ‘profile’ of ourselves through which many of our particularities are expressed¹⁴. Indeed, it is precisely *because* such a profile generally comes to be expressed in our property that we often try to read a person’s property out of curiosity about their specific personality (e.g. when we are at a stranger’s apartment for the first time, looking at their furniture or at their bookshelf) or that we, by the same token, try to ‘hide’ certain things that we own from the view of others – out of fear of the parts of our personality that those pieces of property might reveal.

Hegel himself expresses this line of thought already in the section on Abstract Right. His argument here, after all, does not only make the narrower claim (already alluded to above) that our self comes to be expressed in the things that we *make* (PR § 56), but rather in all of the things that we *own* (PR § 44). And this very clearly encapsulates the line of thought under consideration here: namely that buying and selling private property is in some sense a *self-expressive activity* – which

¹⁴ Dudley Knowles already pursues this dimension of Hegel’s theory of personal property, albeit without reference to Hegel’s argument about mortality (Knowles, “Hegel on Property and Personality,” 45–62).

also explains why, as Hegel himself discusses in his analysis of the consumer economy (e.g. PR § 191ff.), there can be such a close link between our sense of self, and our self-worth, and the property that we own (a link that then can be exploited by advertisers (PR § 191Z)).

Second, it is clear that this kind of profile that emerges in our property can ‘outlive’ us and, most significantly, can spark *other people's memory* of us. Indeed, the process of dealing with a dead person’s belongings – e.g. when dissolving a person’s estate, or clearing up their apartment after their death – is often so complicated and so emotional because, in a way, a person is *in* their property: their belongings bear the “signature (*Siegel*)” (PR § 187A) of their own personality and, hence, make them present to us. It is for the same reason that the rooms of deceased loved ones are often left untouched for the longest time, or that specific belongings of a dead person are used as personal tokens.

Taking these thoughts together, the Hegelian idea, then, is this: by giving individuals the opportunity to freely buy and sell goods, and to accumulate private property in that process, the economic order of a rational state allows individuals to attain a kind of personal afterlife in their belongings. This (limited and metaphorical) immortality of property accumulation then joins the aforementioned immortality of productive labour, such that it is true to say that, in Hegel’s rational state, the economic order allows its members a form of personal afterlife in their products and their property.

(c) *Death and the public institutions of Civil Society: the collective afterlife*

However, beyond fearing the pain of death, the fear of losing *oneself* in the fog of history is not the only worry when it comes to confronting mortality. There is at least another one, that – in some

sense – is complementary to it: namely a worry not about us ourselves, but about those we love and about the things that we value. As Samuel Scheffler has argued¹⁵, we can bring out this worry by envisioning a thought-experiment: How would we feel if we knew that the world – everyone and everything in it – would cease to exist shortly after our death? Would we say that this is, in some sense, of no concern to us anymore just because we will personally be already dead by then?

For most of us, I think, the answer is ‘of course not’. That’s because we’re invested in people and things that we value, and we want them to continue to flourish, even after we cannot longer provide for them. We do not only desire a personal afterlife – that was the topic of the previous section – but we also desire a collective afterlife: a flourishing world of human activity after our death, in which the things and the people that we value are perpetuated.

It is here that, in Hegel’s rational social order, the public institutions of Civil Society (most importantly: the courts (PR 209-229), law enforcement, the welfare system (PR § 230-256)) come in. This is because, on Hegel’s view, these institutions serve as guarantors of a collective afterlife in just this sense. They do fulfil this role, firstly and most directly, by guaranteeing an orderly transfer of property from the deceased to their descendants (PR § 179f., cf. e.g. Wannemann 61), thereby assuring that we can go to our graves knowing that our descendants will be able to reap the benefits of our property. Secondly and more importantly, they also provide a general framework of welfare (PR § 230-256) that makes sure that the security of our descendants will be protected and that their material subsistence will be, at least at some basic level, assured even if e.g. their inherited property is not enough to guarantee it. Indeed, from this perspective, it becomes even more perspicuous why Hegel famously insists that public welfare institutions,

¹⁵ Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, esp. p. 18-19.

especially the corporations, can count as a second family¹⁶ (§ 238+Z): these institutions constitute a persistent fall-back once I cannot longer personally care for my children – thereby making it easier for me to prepare myself for my own death.

Thirdly and lastly, Hegel thinks that, within the rational state, the public institutions extend this framework of protection (PR § 230-256) not only to people, but also to many other objects that social members value: e.g. religious traditions, certain pieces of art etc. In the Wannemann notes, Hegel is cited as expressing this point in a particularly clear fashion, when he insists that “the life of public institutions (*Staatsleben*)” comes to be infused into the life of religion, the sciences and into the “life of the arts (*Kunst-Leben*)” (VPR Wannemann, 189). By sustaining this kind of civic life – and conferring some of the persisting power of Ethical Life itself (“*[die] objektive Sittlichkeit [...] [ist] allein das Bleibende*”, PR § 145Z) on religion, arts and the sciences – public institutions sustain a vibrant world of value that persists, even if one of its individual members perishes.

On Hegel’s view then, rational public institutions complement the rational economic sphere in preparing its members to die well. Whereas a good economic sphere allows them to survive death personally, those public institutions create the conditions for a collective afterlife.

(d) Death and political state: the psychological salience of death

This brings us finally to the narrow set of *political* institutions which Hegel calls ‘the (political) state’ and whose task – apart from supervising and coordinating the subordinate ethical spheres of family and Civil Society – lies in the direct pursuit of the common good. Unlike the public

¹⁶ For a comprehensive reading of this particular phrase, see also Schüle, “Die Korporation als zweite Familie,” 101-116.

institutions of Civil Society, the task of the political state does therefore not consist in the immediate preservation of the welfare/security of individuals or of individual groups, but rather in realizing the good of the community *as a whole*. As such, it might be even more mysterious than with the economic and public institutions of Civil Society how the political state can ever play a significant role in reconciling us, as individuals, to our own mortality.

But, indeed, according to Hegel, that is what it does – albeit in a somewhat more roundabout way than we have seen it in the previous discussions of family and Civil Society. More specifically speaking, in contrast to the institutions of family and Civil Society, the political state does not aim directly at addressing our fear(s) of death (for example, by reminding us that there are parts of us that can ‘survive’ death), but rather *at giving us a boarder perspective from which these fears seem less salient to us*, thereby alleviating them indirectly¹⁷. More specifically, the thought is this: the political state habituates its members into identifying so closely with their community, that the thought of their individual death becomes much less important to them. To put this in another way: the political state, or so Hegel argues, raises its members to a new perspective on which they feel part of something much bigger than themselves (namely the political community), such that *everything* surrounding their personal demise – including the kind of worries we have discussed so far, such as e.g. the pain of dying, the fear of abandoning loved ones – loses some of its psychological significance.

¹⁷ There seems to be yet another idea in play here, which is suggested by Hegel’s generally organicist way of talking about the political state (e.g. PR § 158+Z and *passim*), but which is – as far as I can see – not spelled out explicitly anywhere. This idea is that, by coming to identify with the political organism, individuals come to see the value of *generational change* within this organism: just like a natural organism, the spiritual organism of the state relies on a cycle of perpetual inner renewal, in which the same kind of functions (i.e. roles) are being filled out by new people: this brings divergent perspectives to the different roles and prevents the accumulation of institutional power in just one individual. And, indeed, seeing the value of such generational change might help individuals see a certain value to ageing and mortality: it facilitates and brings along generational change in a natural way.

In his text, Hegel expresses this by saying that the political state helps individuals overcome death by habituating them into close identification – “faith and trust” (PR § 147) – with the political whole, such that their perspective on their individual death is fundamentally transformed (PR § 324). Indeed, Hegel argues – in a passage that is distinctly uncomfortable for a modern, liberal reader – that, if this habituation goes aright, individuals will be able to overcome their fears of their personal death to such a significant degree, that they are willing to sacrifice themselves for the community under extreme and exceptional circumstances¹⁸, most importantly under the conditions of war (PR § 324+Z, Homeyer 277).

Hegel here is, of course, echoing themes from the famous discussion of Lord and Bondsman¹⁹ in the *Phenomenology* (PhG ¶ 196) where he had already introduced the idea that voluntary sacrifice can, under certain conditions, be the ultimate victory over death, since it subordinates life to freedom and transforms the inevitable reality of death into a free, positive choice²⁰. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel had obliquely introduced the theme of sacrifice already within the sphere of the family, where marriage is presented as a moment of surrender (e.g. of certain individual liberties) that ultimately leads to a higher form of freedom²¹. But it is within the sphere of the state that Hegel returns to the topic of a sacrifice *of life* in a narrower and more literal sense, tying it into his discussion of how the state can transform the perspectives of individuals on

¹⁸ Indeed, Hegel seems to hold the view that giving citizens the opportunity for such sacrifice is part of the rational significance of war. For a discussion of this highly problematic part of Hegel’s view see e.g. Hardimon, *Hegel’s Social Philosophy*, 230-236 or Black, “Hegel on War”.

¹⁹ This discussion is, of course, the locus of Hegel’s perhaps most famous discussion of death outside of his social philosophy. For a discussion of this see, for example, Pippin, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness* or Neuhaus, “Desire, Recognition, and the Relation between Bondsman and Lord,” 37-54.

²⁰ The idea of sacrifice as ultimately victory over death is deeply connected to the Christian motive of Christ’s sacrifice as a way of overcoming death. For Hegel’s theology of divine sacrifice, see Williams, *Death of God*, 296-302.

²¹ In this point about the sacrificial dynamics inherent in marriage I’m indebted to Adams, *Eclipse of Grace*, 41.

their own death – and helping them, at least momentarily, to transcend all of their fears surrounding their own personal demise²².

Now, of course, it might seem as if this line of argument in Hegel’s text is in blatant contradiction with the arguments that we have portrayed before. After all: if, in the end, the political state is helping us by fundamentally *transforming our perspective* (and making our fears of personal death become ‘nothing’ to us), then why was there a need to address these fears more directly e.g. in Civil Society or in the family?

This worry about Hegel’s argument might even further deepen, if one considers that Hegel – as a matter of his own, philosophical standpoint – seems to indicate that the perspective that the political state habituates us into is closer to metaphysical truth. Indeed, Hegel often conveys the impression that from the standpoint of the philosopher itself – the standpoint that sees the unfolding of world history and the slow evolution of what Hegel calls ‘spirit’ – the life and death of one particular individual matter little. From that grand perspective, these lifecycles of individuals seem more like “a mere play of waves” (PR §145Z, cf. also PR § 323) against the slow and steady stream of human history, a mere “accident” (e.g. VPR Henrich, 123) against the substantiality of the development of human spirit. But, then, why *isn’t* it just enough that the social order transforms our perspective such that we worry less about our own particular death?

The answer to these questions, it seems to me, is this: Hegel thinks that we can transcend our fear of death only temporarily, but never *for the course of a whole life*. While there is something fundamentally human about proving one’s independence even from one’s own particular life itself, something that confirms that freedom lies at the core of our being, human psychology always stays

²² Bubbio, *Sacrifice in the Post-Kantian Tradition*, 61-85 gives a very helpful overview over the general significance of the motif of sacrifice for Hegel. I’m indebted to an anonymous referee for pointing me to this reference.

attached to care about their own particular selves and therefore also our own particular deaths. Indeed, in the ‘Morality chapter’ of the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel had made an explicit case that such care for one’s particularity, even though of course subordinate to freedom, is an irreducible component of the human experience and therefore deserves what Hegel here calls a “right of particularity for the subject” (PR § 124A) – a right to be taken seriously by others and respected by any social order. So while a rational social order aims at helping individuals transcend a problematically exclusive care for their own particular selves (to which without a lack of proper education they might be prone), there can be never any doubt that “the right of individuals to their particularity is also contained in ethical substantiality” (PR § 154) i.e. that the rational order helps them respect and find the proper place for their particular care of self. And this, of course, extends to the care for our particular death and the fears that come with it.

Hegel, for this reason, would be sceptical of philosophical views that have argued, e.g. on metaphysical grounds, that it is *irrational* to indulge one’s personal fears of death. Indeed, such views, arguably, go all the way back to antiquity (e.g. famously, to Epicurus²³ who we have already implicitly mentioned), but have found contemporary advocates as well. David Velleman²⁴ for example, has more recently argued that most of our fears of death are based on a false conception of time – particularly on the ultimately mistaken view that time ‘passes’, and that we can, hence, run out of it – such that our fears, by and large, are not to be engaged, but rather to be recognized as largely groundless. An adequate preparation for death, on this kind of view, does not consist in making sure that our fears of death are resolved (e.g. by giving us certainty that our loved ones

²³ Indeed, a line of argument like this is famously unfolded in Epicurus’ *Letter to Menoecus*, which culminates in the famous claim that – if things are considered from the right perspective– ‘death is nothing to us’.

²⁴See Velleman, “So It Goes,” pp. 371-382. It is worth noting that Velleman himself pulled back from some of these earlier ideas, e.g. in Velleman, “Dying”.

will be safe and that they will remember us), but rather dissolved (i.e. by showing us that there was not much to worry about in the first place).

But Hegel – as the line of argument we have followed here hopefully makes clear – would be sceptical of these kinds of attempts. For him, whatever the underlying metaphysical truth of the matter, we are always wedded to the kind of care about our particular selves, on which personal death maintains significance for us: we can only temporarily reason our way out of our fear of death or transcend it in a sacrificial moment of defiance, but not for the course of an entire life. This also seems to be the background for the sly compliment that Hegel pays Epicurus, when he briefly discusses Epicurus’ view of death in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. There, Hegel says that Epicurus’ view on death is “correct from the perspective of immediacy (*Dieses ist richtig in Ansehung des Unmittelbaren*)” (VGP II, 331), which of course for Hegel – the great ‘enemy of immediacy’ – is not much of a compliment, but rather a way of saying that Epicurus’ view lacks dialectical sophistication (VGP II, 335). This is because, as we might conclude given what we have seen above, the Epicurean view, while capturing something correct about death from a purely metaphysical perspective, does not capture the fact that its opposite – namely the that personal death should always matters to us – also has some limited truth to it, given that particular care of the self is an irreducible element of the human experience and therefore deserves a proper place in our lives.

By contrast, Hegel’s rational social order *does* attempt to capture this dialectics. The rational social order gives individuals an opportunity to grow beyond care for their personal death – even to thoroughly defy it in exceptional, sacrificial moments – but it does not deny the significance of this care altogether. Rather, it gives that care for one’s personal death a proper sphere in the family and in Civil Society, where our worries about dying (e.g. about its pain, its

effect on our standing in history and its impact on what we, as particular beings, value) are taken seriously and are properly responded to. That way, we do not need to maintain a ‘universal’ perspective on our death for the entirety of our lives – but we also do not become stuck in a care for our particular perspective, instead being offered ways of growing beyond even death.

III. Hegel today: a politics of mortality?

I want to turn now to the contemporary implications of the Hegelian argument we have reconstructed so far. After all: up to this point, my description of Hegel’s rational social order, and the role that mortality plays in it, might have elicited only a shrug from more contemporary-minded readers. Such a reaction, I take it, is sustained by the thought that *our* contemporary social world (e.g. our economic practices, our public institutions) do not look like the rational social world Hegel describes. Indeed: even though it might have arguably been – on a standard reading of Hegel’s social philosophy – one of Hegel’s ambitions to show that the rational society is already embodied in contemporary social institutions²⁵, it just seems obvious that this is straightforwardly *not* the case. In our social world, e.g. industrial workers *don’t* get to see the products of their highly mechanical labour as their personal legacy or as a way of extending their lives beyond their deaths. And, by the same token, many of us don’t have the trust that the public order they inhabit serves as a guarantor for a collective afterlife – rather, they might think that public institutions (e.g. the police) here precisely do not guarantee the safety of their loved ones or the persistence of the things and traditions that they value.

²⁵ I will not take a stand on this issue here, as well as on the notoriously difficult interpretation of the *Doppelsatz* that is connected to it.

I don't think, however, this means that Hegel's argument lacks contemporary relevance altogether. After all: instead of a description of what *already is*, we might just as well take Hegel's argument as a description of what *could be*. Indeed: Hegel's argument shows us not only how intimately economic, public and political practices bear on our relationship to death, but also what kind of *power* they could have in helping solve one of the most existential problems we can imagine: the problem of how to face death. By bringing to light this power, Hegel's argument can be read as making a case for a kind of politics of mortality: for a kind of political endeavour that initiates a conscious, collective effort *to activate this power* in the social order by actively holding it to the standard of how easy it makes it for us to face death with a reconciled attitude.

Indeed, by highlighting rather specific ways in which economic, public and political practices could, in principle, help us overcome fears of death, the Hegelian argument can even be read as a guide for where exactly a politics of mortality should intervene and what problems it should address. Let me give *three examples* of what I have in mind, stemming from the family, the economic order and the sphere of public institutions respectively. To start where it is perhaps most obvious, namely with the family²⁶: it seems pretty clear that a Hegelian politics of mortality would have to be critical of any way in which the special sphere of the family is subverted by norms of Civil Society. On the one hand, that means, more concretely, that a Hegelian politics of mortality would have to be critical of any attempt to pressure parents into preparing their children 'for real life' by making their love of them entirely conditional on the success in fulfilling external norms (e.g. getting a good job or good grades). That is because such a conditional practice, at least if taken to the extreme, destroys the bonds of characteristically unconditional recognition that is meant – on a Hegelian view – to structure familial relationships, and without which the family will

²⁶ I would like to thank an anonymous referee for prompting me to reflect on the implications that a politics of mortality might have within the family.

not be able to perform its central functions: including the function of ‘inoculating’ family members against the shame that comes with their own organic existence (and, ultimately, organic demise).

On the other hand, it would mean that a Hegelian politics of mortality would have to be critical of social circumstances – such as e.g. inflexible work-schedules, insufficient amounts of ‘personal days’ etc. – that force families to outsource all of the ‘end of life’-care for their family members to professional institutions, such as senior living facilities. This is because such professional places for death do not reliably offer the same kind of unconditional community of trust that the family does: doctors and nurses do not share the “whole of individual existence” (PR § 163Z) with their patients, but rather a relationship of Civil Society. By creating social conditions under which families can provide care for the ultimate conclusion of the *Gattungsprozess* only with great difficulty, a social order therefore runs the risk of depriving individuals of the kind of intimate ties as they become especially important when individuals confront the break-down of their own organic functionality.

When it comes to economic practices even more directly, one of the problems that a Hegelian politics of mortality would have to address is the phenomenon of *abstraction* i.e. the phenomenon that, under current economic conditions, products become less reflective of their producer and instead reflect solely the preferences of the generic customer. From the perspective of a Hegelian ‘politics of mortality’, this is problematic for *two reasons*. The first reason, already alluded to above, is that abstraction makes it more difficult, sometimes downright impossible, for workers to still identify with the products of their labour – thereby, and this is the dimension that is crucial for us here, also making it more difficult to consider these products as a kind of *legacy* that gives us the kind of limited form of immortality that productive activity otherwise promises.

To put this in different terms: the broken link – or just to use the relevant technical term here: the alienation – between worker and product, from the perspective of the Hegelian argument we are considering here, becomes problematic not just because it makes the life of workers immeasurably harder (which is the dimension usually emphasized e.g. by Marxist critics), but also because it makes their *dying* more difficult: it doesn't assuage, and may even stoke, the fear of not being able to 'survive' death, to be an ultimately negligible blip in history. In that way, abstraction in the economic sphere – a phenomenon that Hegel himself of course recognizes as a tendency, but appears to have thought containable (e.g. PR § 192) – emerges as a viable threat to making the modern economic sphere a place where death can be overcome: indeed, it might transform this very sphere into a catalyst and amplifier for the existential fears that accompany death.

Secondly, and perhaps less obviously, 'abstraction' also becomes problematic – from the perspective of a Hegelian 'politics of mortality' – because it makes self-expression through property ever more difficult. After all: if products do more and more reflect the preferences of the generic customer, and therefore become more generic themselves, they can serve less and less as signature of who we, as particular people, are. Indeed, the exercise of 'reading' a stranger's apartment for clues about their personality – which we have used to illustrate Hegel's argument earlier – becomes much more difficult in times of e.g. ever generic do-it-yourself furniture that makes personal property, as one could put it, less personal.

From this perspective, the drive to customize the things that we are buying and to make them less generic – a drive which is easy to belittle – reveals itself not as a mere fancy, but rather as an, albeit perhaps superficial, attempt to recover some of the immortality that things might otherwise grant us. I'm saying 'superficial' here, because – of course – trying to counteract the force of abstraction at the level of one *individual good* (e.g. the customized chair, the customized

dinner table) does ultimately little to address this economic phenomenon at the systematic level at which it truly resides: and at which, of course, a politics of mortality itself would have to address it.

Finally, in the sphere of public institutions, one problem that a Hegel-inspired politics of mortality might address are ever present political attempts to make cuts to what we referred to earlier as the ‘general framework of welfare’ (in modern terms: e.g. unemployment benefits or subsidized low income housing). Now, of course: it has been a well-known staple of contemporary left-wing politics to criticize these cuts from the perspective of life within these societies, insofar as they make the life of many social members more precarious and vulnerable, potentially harming their ability to satisfy their basic necessities and to continue their material existence. But Hegel’s argument shows us that this standard critique leaves something important out of the picture: namely that these cuts are problematic because they undermine the chances of a flourishing *collective afterlife* for each of us, giving us less certainty that our descendants and their descendants will live in a world in which they can flourish.

This shift of perspective (from thinking only about social life to thinking about the social afterlife) is especially crucial, because it brings out that there is a way in which these kinds of cuts harm not only those of us who are most immediately affected by them, but also the rest of society. This is because, as Hegel’s reflection on death and the social order reveal, as mortal beings, we are not only tied to our own future, but to the future of other people and other things that we value. And, since these futures are largely beyond our individual control (and not even truly predictable for us), we would do well to create a world in which these futures can unfold, however they shape up, safely and successfully.

There might be even more examples of what would fall into the purview of such a politics of mortality – but I shall stop here, because what I’ve said so far, I think, suffices to show what we set out to show: namely that Hegel’s discussion of mortality and the social order is not merely a neglected historical aspect of his complex conception of the rational state – but rather has immediate relevance to social philosophy and to social criticism today. That way, and I hope you will allow me this pun, the discussion of death in Hegel’s social theory, proves that this theory is still very much alive²⁷.

²⁷ I would like to thank Borhane Blili-Hamelin, Daniel Brinkerhoff-Young, Conor Cullen, Thomas Frisch, Gal Katz, Tuomo Tiisala, and Leonard Weiß for comments on this paper. My special thanks to Fred Neuhouser and Gal Katz for inspiring me to write on this issue in the first place, as well as to Katja Vogt for inviting me to present an earlier draft at her Munich-NYC Ethics workshop. I also owe a great debt of gratitude to the editors and reviewers for this journal for their helpful observations and objections.

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