



Florian van der Zee\*

## Scepticism and the Modern State in the Thought of Georg W. F. Hegel

### *Abstract*

Both the concept of “post-truth” and ancient scepticism link a plurality of irreconcilable “truths” to a certain disregard for truth. Post-truth phenomena are often deemed politically detrimental. This paper discusses how Georg W. F. Hegel rethinks ancient scepticism to avert similar detrimental effects, shows that Hegel’s thought suggests that a plurality of irreconcilable “truths” needs not exclude faith in truth, and that the modern state rests on both.

**Keywords:** Georg W. F. Hegel, modern state, ancient scepticism, post-truth, truth, freedom of conscience

Does the modern state presuppose a particular attitude towards truth? And if so, can political unity persist in the face of an irreconcilable plurality of “truths”, or does such a plurality eventually undermine political unity? Such questions are central to the debate on post-truth politics. This paper sets out to show that they are also questions with which the German philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) concerned himself, especially in his engagements with ancient scepticism.

Perhaps the convergence between the debate on post-truth politics and Hegel’s reflections on ancient scepticism should not surprise us, given the similarity between the latter and the concept of “post-truth”. At a very general level, the concept of “post-truth” tends to be used to link two societal phenomena. The term ‘post-truth’ is often used alongside terms like ‘conspiracy theories’, ‘fake news’ or ‘alternative facts’ – terms, which one way or another, signify the existence of a plurality of irreconcilable “truths”. The concept of “post-truth” links such phenomena to a certain disregard for (the) truth, and as such it is related to inquiries into different ways of neglecting truth (e.g., McIntyre, 2018).

In its generality the distinction between these two phenomena – i.e., the existence of a plurality of “truths” and a certain disregard for (the) truth – reveals, or at the very

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least suggests, a similarity between post-truth phenomena and ancient scepticism. For, as is particularly evident in Pyrrhonian scepticism, the observation of a plurality of “truths” plays an important role in ancient scepticism. Aenesidemus’ Ten Tropes, for example, point to a plurality of perceptions and ways of life; the first of Agrippa’s Five Tropes makes the general observation that there is irreconciled disagreement, both within the views of everyday life and within the views of philosophers (Hegel, 2020c; Vogt, 2021). The observation of a plurality of “truths” then leads to the suspension of judgment (*epoché*), via the method of equipollence (*isostheneia*) – that is, the method of finding equally compelling arguments in favour of both a particular proposition, perception or theory, and its opposite (Forster, 1989; Hegel, 2020c; Vogt, 2021). It should be mentioned that the ancient sceptic does not require the existence of a plurality of “truths” prior to equipollence; in the absence of some proposition’s or theory’s opposite, the sceptic will set out to formulate one herself (Forster, 1989). But in the face of actual disagreement, scepticism comes quite naturally.

It thus makes sense that through his engagement with (ancient) scepticism, Hegel touches upon some of the questions that also centre in the debate around post-truth politics. There is a surprising twist, however. For post-truth politics tend to be framed as somehow detrimental to ongoing political unity, especially in the form of the modern, liberal-democratic state. But Hegel manages to look favourably upon both the modern state as he conceptualises it and ancient scepticism.

The next section of this paper is devoted to showing what Hegel means by scepticism, engaging with his distinction between ancient and modern scepticism and outlining his preference for the former. In the second section I will show that Hegel is not blind to the politically destructive tendencies of scepticism, and in the third section I will show that Hegel in fact critically rethinks scepticism, transforming it into the dialectical moment of his own philosophy. In the fourth section, I will discuss the way in which Hegel’s rethinking of ancient scepticism transforms its politically destructive tendencies, not wholly negating them but rather turning them into a tension constructive for the modern, liberal-democratic state, i.e., the state that embraces freedom of conscience. Finally, in the fifth section, I will briefly relate the results of my inquiry to the question of contemporary post-truth politics.

## Which scepticism?

When Hegel speaks of ‘scepticism’, he can mean one of two things, for he distinguishes between ancient (or Pyrrhonian) and modern (or Humean) scepticism (Hegel, 2019: §39R; Hegel, 2020c: 360, 361-62). The main difference between these two types of scepticism is that the latter is dogmatic, whereas the former is methodical and manages through its method to escape dogmatism (Hegel, 2019: §39R; Hegel, 2020c: 359, 374).

We have in the introduction already encountered the methodical nature of ancient scepticism: through the method of equipollence, the transition into a state of belief or judgment is suspended. Especially in the case of the scepticism of Sextus Empiricus, the sceptic need not venture beyond *appearances*: equipollence simply entails that it *appears* that arguments of equal weight can be given in favour of a judgment and its opposite, thus preventing the passage into a state of belief (Forster, 1989: 9-13; Hegel, 2020c: 368).

Modern scepticism lacks such a method and instead revolves around “specific problems concern[ing] the legitimacy of proceeding from the claims about a certain kind of subject matter, the knowledge of which is assumed to be absolutely or relatively unproblematic, to the claims about a second subject matter, the knowledge of which is not felt to be unproblematic in the same way” (Forster, 1989: 11). Modern scepticism, states Hegel, dogmatically assumes particular, empirical matters to be unproblematic, while denying the generalities of thought:

Der Humesche [Skeptizismus] legt die *Wahrheit* des Empirischen, des Gefühls, der Anschauung zum Grunde und bestreitet die allgemeinen Bestimmungen und Gesetze von da aus, aus dem Grunde, weil sie nicht eine Berechtigung durch die sinnliche Wahrnehmung haben. (Hegel, 2019: §39R [p. 112]; cf. Hegel, 2020c: 375-76)

(Humean scepticism makes the *truth* of the empirical, of feeling and intuition in its foundations, and from there contests the universal determinations and laws on the grounds that they lack justification through sensory perception. [Hegel, 2010: §39R])

A prime example of what Hegel is after can be found in David Hume’s problematisation of the notion of “causality”. Say we observe one billiard ball colliding with another, after which the first billiard ball comes to a stop and the second one rolls away. If we understand causation to be a necessary relation between an object or state called ‘cause’ and an object or state called ‘effect’, we may object against the notion of “causation” that we do not, in fact, perceive some force inscribing the observed sequence of events with necessity. Indeed, according to Hume (1985: 205ff., esp. 214), we simply infer this necessity from past experience. But apparently, Hegel’s critique goes, our perception of the sequence of events is supposed to be unproblematic and certain.

Resting on presuppositions, modern scepticism is itself vulnerable to sceptical attack (Forster, 1989: 11-12; Hegel, 2020c: 393). Consequently, Hegel regards ancient scepticism as the superior of the two – as “wahrhafter, tiefer Natur” (“of a truthful, deep nature” [my translation]; Hegel 2020c: 360). In his *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* (*Lectures on the History of Philosophy*; 2020c), Hegel presents ancient scepticism as a formidable opponent to any claim to knowledge, revealing time and again the transience and ultimate non-being, that is: the finitude of everything it can get its hands on.

## Scepticism's politically destructive tendencies

Despite his praise, Hegel does perceive dangers in scepticism. Important for my discussion is the fact that he regards scepticism as politically destructive. Hegel's philosophy offers three major reasons for regarding scepticism as a threat to political life.

First, scepticism undermines political life insofar as the sceptic's suspension of judgment not only applies to descriptive assertions, but it undermines the validity of norms, values and laws, too (Hegel, 2020c: 364, 378-79, 384; Hegel, 2020d: 159-60).

Second, and closely related to the former, is the insight that scepticism results in a kind of solipsism. In the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*Phenomenology of Spirit*), Hegel observes that the sceptical method of equipollence assures that, *through thought*, nothing but the *activity of thinking* remains. Only the process of thinking remains; everything else – all determinacy within it – is shown to be fleeting. In this sceptical nothing-but-thinking lies the tranquillity, or *ataraxia*, the sceptic aims for:

Das skeptische Selbstbewußtsein erfährt also in dem Wandel alles dessen, was sich für es befestigen will, seine eigene Freiheit als durch es selbst sich gegeben und erhalten; es ist sich diese Ataraxie des sich selbst Denkens, die unwandelbare und wahrhafte Gewißheit seiner selbst. (Hegel, 2020d: 161)

(Throughout the changing flux of everything which would secure itself for it, skeptical self-consciousness thus experiences its own freedom, both as given to itself by itself and as sustained by itself to itself; it is this *Ataraxia* [indifference] of thought-thinking-itself, the unchangeable and *genuine certainty of its own self*. [Hegel, 2018: 121])

Only one constant remains in the sceptical consciousness: the fact of its own, liberating process of thought, negating all determinacy it manages to get its hands on. Thus, the sceptic is left with nothing but themselves (see also: Hegel, 2020c: 361, 370), and in discussions as well as in life in general, common ground is lost (Hegel, 2020d: 162-3).

Third, the sceptical suspension of judgment revolts against the political-theological aspect of political unity. That is, the polity has to embody something which transcends the individual. It has to encompass all individual life and being within it, as is, for Hegel, shown clearly by the state's relation to war:

Im Dasein erscheint so diese negative Beziehung des Staates auf sich, als Beziehung eines Andern auf ein Anderes, und als ob das Negative ein Äußerliches wäre. [...] [S]ie ist sein höchstes eigenes Moment, – seine wirkliche Unendlichkeit als die Idealität alles Endlichen in ihm, – die Seite, *worin die Substanz als die absolute Macht gegen alles Einzelne und Besondere, gegen das Leben, Eigentum und dessen Rechte, wie gegen die weiteren Kreise, die Nichtigkeit derselben zum Dasein und Bewußtsein bringt*. (Hegel, 2017: §323 [p. 316]; emphasis added)

(In *existence [Dasein]* this *negative* relation [*Beziehung*] of the state to itself thus appears as the relation of *another to another*, as if the negative were something *external*. [...] [T]his negative relation is the state's *own* highest moment – its actual infinity as the ideality of everything finite within it. It is that aspect *whereby the substance, as the state's absolute power over everything individual and particular, over life, property, and the latter's rights, and over the wider circles within it, gives the nullity of such things an existence [Dasein] and makes it present to the consciousness.* [Hegel, 2020a: §323 [p. 360]; final emphasis added])

As a final possibility, the polity's identity implies the necessity of war. But war entails the possibility of loss of life and property. Insofar, then, as the polity has, in however ultimate a sense, a right to engage in wars, it has a right transcending that of individual life and being within it. War, then, only makes sense if the polity embodies something higher, something more valuable than the individual. If all ideas of supra-individual values are suspended in a sceptical *epoché*, the polity's right over the individual is suspended as well and its existence is threatened.

### From scepticism to speculative philosophy

In light of scepticism's politically destructive tendencies, Hegel, as an advocate of the modern state, may be expected to refute scepticism in one way or another. This, indeed, he does. In the *Phänomenologie*, scepticism figures not primarily as an historical phenomenon, but as a shape of consciousness which forms an incomplete moment on the road towards true consciousness. As Michael N. Forster (1989: 166) puts it, the *Phänomenologie* aims to show “that *all possible* ways of articulating a distinctness of concepts from their instances – all possible shapes of consciousness, or ways of positing a subject in opposition to an object – [...] lead] to self-contradiction”. The work sets out to progress, through a series of productive self-contradictions, from the simplest and most naïve way of framing the distinction between (knowing) subject and (known) object to the eventual overcoming of that very distinction. The endpoint of the *Phänomenologie* yields the viewpoint of Absolute Spirit: the subject that realises itself in the double sense of *becoming real* and *comprehending*. This comprehension Hegel calls “Absolute Knowledge”, and Hegel's philosophical system is to realise it (Hegel, 2020d: 591; Forster, 1989: 167).

In Hegel's viewpoint of Absolute Knowledge, then, subject and object coincide and the shape of consciousness Hegel calls “scepticism” is overcome – but only partially. For, according to Hegel, the sceptical consciousness, albeit in an imperfect way, consciously realises the dialectical moment of thought, that is, the moment of thought that realises the finitude and untruth of standpoints. As such, it is constitutive of the *Phänomenologie* itself, driving its movement from one shape of consciousness to the

next through the exposition of self-contradiction (Hegel, 2020d: 160). Here we have a general formulation of the way in which Hegel overcomes scepticism: by rethinking it, retaining its formidability as a moment of his own philosophy. As Hegel put it in his 1802 essay “Verhältnis des Skeptizismus zur Philosophie”: philosophy ought to be, or true philosophy is, “weder Skeptizismus noch Dogmatismus und also beides zugleich” (“neither scepticism nor dogmatism and therefore both at the same time” [my translation]; Hegel, 2020b: 227).

Let us look more closely at how Hegel retains important sceptical moments while dispensing with the *epoché*, and at the way in which this helps to overcome the politically destructive tendencies of scepticism. The first step in overcoming scepticism consists in outlining scepticism’s own limits. For Hegel, truth and the good are, ultimately, infinite. What is properly true and good is such regardless of time and place. But the infinite, notes Hegel, has no negation, no opposite. It includes all contradiction, it embraces all opposition and negation, and as such it is beyond the reach of scepticism. For, the sceptic’s move towards *epoché* rests on a methodical search for oppositions (equipollence). Thus, the infinite, the True and the Good (I will sometimes capitalise the words ‘True’, ‘Truth’, and ‘Good’ so as to emphasise the distinction between the referents of those terms and actually held beliefs about what is true and good) lies beyond the reach of equipollence and, consequently, scepticism (Hegel, 2020c: 372, 396-7).

Furthermore, Hegel argues that phenomena like thought and ethical life cannot do without the infinite. He does this when discussing “die sogenannten Beweise vom Dasein Gottes” (“the so-called proofs of the existence of God”; Hegel, 2019: §50R [p. 131]; trans. Hegel, 2010: §50R). These “proofs” move from the existence of the world, understood either as a collection of infinitely many contingencies (in the case of cosmological proofs) or as a collection of infinitely many purposes and purposeful relations (in the case of teleological proofs), to the existence of God, understood either as a first cause (cosmological proofs) or as the ultimate purpose (teleological proofs). But for Hegel, these “proofs” are not really proofs at all. The existence of God – for Hegel synonymous with the infinite – is not inferred, as something previously uncertain, from the certain existence of a world of finite things and relations. Rather, these “proofs” express the leap (*Sprung*) from the sensory (*das Sinnliche*) into the supersensory (*das Übersinnliche*) that characterises thinking (Hegel, 2019: §50R). They express that thinking (and ethical life), insofar as it aims for the True or the Good, is itself the movement from empirical determinations to the general and necessary, i.e., the infinite (Hegel, 2019: §50).

However, that still leaves the question of actually held beliefs, which, especially in a context of plurality, usually turn out to be quite negatable. How are these actually held

but negatable beliefs to be related to the infinite? Hegel's subsequent argumentative steps serve to solve this problem.

First, Hegel argues that the infinite *is*, and that being and thought cannot be radically separated from it. Hegel accepts the ontological proof of the existence of God as expressing an analytical truth. Although, Hegel submits, it is the case that everything finite is marked by a discrepancy between concept and being, this does not apply to God: "Gott aber soll ausdrücklich das sein, das nur „als existierend gedacht“ werden kann, wo der Begriff das Sein in sich schließt" ("God [...] is explicitly supposed to be what can only be '*thought as existing*', where the concept includes being"; Hegel, 2019: §51R [p. 136]; trans. Hegel, 2010: §51R). Not to be would be contrary to being infinite. In a similar fashion, Hegel maintains that to think that thought cannot ascend towards the infinite, would be to think in a fashion at odds not only with thought itself (as thought, for Hegel, *is* the attempt to ascend towards the infinite), but with the infinite, too. For, to separate the infinite from anything, including finite thought, would be to restrict it to a realm of its own, thus rendering it finite (Hegel, 2019: §45 Add.; cf. Shanks, 2008; Steunebrink, 2017).

For Hegel, thinking is thus predicated on the infinite – which he also calls God, the Absolute, or the Idea – and the infinite cannot be separated from thought and being. There cannot be a realm of truth and goodness "over there" and a realm of particularity and insufficiency "over here", as we find in the Platonic distinction between the material world and the Ideas.

That means that the infinite's, or Idea's, manifestation in external (material, temporal, i.e., finite) reality has to be an integral yet distinct moment of the infinite itself (Hegel, 2017: §1R). That is to say, in order to be *infinite*, the infinite has to realise itself *in the finite*, for if eternal (infinite) truth would not somehow include spatiotemporal (finite) existence, it would itself be limited, i.e., finite; furthermore, the infinite has to realise *itself* in the finite, for otherwise its realisations would depend on something external to it, which would once again limit it.

The Idea realising itself is the "Absolute Spirit" we encountered in the *Phänomenologie*. Speaking of "Spirit" begins to make sense when we realise that if external reality is to maintain its externality (which is a form of finitude), division cannot be done away with. The relation between the Idea and reality can thus not be one of simple equivalence, nor can it be one of mere resemblance. Rather, it has to form a differentiated unity, and the different moments of this unity must somehow be re-integrated. This is where the notion of "spirit" comes in. One may think of a flower: it starts out as a seed, grows, flowers, and eventually withers away. If you speed up the process, you see a multitude of forms, a sequence of novelty and loss. But insofar as you are a spiritual being, you can gather up this multitude and realise that it is not merely novelty and loss, but rather the realisation of a flower – which can only be comprehended

as this whole of novelty and loss, i.e., as a differentiated unity (example adapted from Marcuse, 1954: 8-9). Realisation thus entails difference – and necessarily so, lest finitude is negated – and spirit is required to overcome this difference – not by bluntly negating it, but by integrating it into a now differentiated unity (Hegel, 2020c: 397). Full realisation, in short, entails not just external realisation but also spiritual realisation. This is why the Idea, to overcome the difference it necessarily posits in realising itself, has to realise beings capable of overcoming that difference: spiritual beings, i.e., humans (Hegel, 2019: §§160-2, §§236-44).

With the above-mentioned arguments in mind, Hegel makes one more, decisive move: he turns equipollence, and thus scepticism as such, into dialectics. What drives equipollence, argues Hegel, is the fact that everything finite, all human thoughts included, entail a negation: “Von allen Vorstellungen vom Wahren kann die Endlichkeit aufgezeigt werden, da sie eine Negation, somit einen Widerspruch in sich enthalten” (“The finitude of all representations of truth can be pointed out, as they include a negation and thus a contradiction” [my translation]; Hegel, 2020c: 359). However, according to Hegel, the sceptic misunderstands these negations. For the sceptic does not see that these negations are determinate, and that the oppositions encountered in equipollence are to be ordered into a system of relativised truths (Hegel, 2019: §78R, §81R, §82R). That is to say, Hegel maintains that the oppositions informing sceptical equipollence are not arbitrary. The oppositional views are in fact internally connected pairs. Thus, Hegel regards the oppositions as the revelation of *self*-contradictions. This revelation does not *annihilate* standpoints, but *relativises* or *particularises* them, and out of this relativisation emerges a new standpoint: a differentiated unity, incorporating the previous oppositions (cf. Hegel, 2020c: 386-7). The realisation of these determinate negations Hegel calls “dialectics”, and dialectics does not end in *epoché*, but allows thought to ascend towards the infinite.

What does the dialectical ascension towards the infinite look like? First, some belief is absolutely and immediately held. That is to say, the belief is held and shapes human life without question. Next, the belief’s finitude reveals itself: the belief is revealed to be negatable, to allow for an opposite. This stage of mediacy or separation is fertile soil for scepticism, as the belief that turns out to be negatable can now easily be regarded as if it may just as well be true as untrue. Third comes the realisation that the fact that the belief can be negated reveals its relativity. The belief is neither absolutely true nor absolutely untrue; it can be reconciled with its “opposite”, as it becomes a moment in a now further elaborated conceptual scheme, a moment in a now differentiated unity. In the place of *epoché*, then, comes reconciliation, and the ascension towards the infinite consists in a series of movements from immediacy through opposition to reconciliation, rendering the entirety of thought more adequate to the infinite (Hegel, 2019: §§79-82).



The Hegelian dialectic thus follows the schema immediacy – mediacy – differentiated (mediated) unity, also expressed as thesis – antithesis – synthesis. For the dialectic to be properly understood, however, it must be realised that the moments of immediacy and differentiated unity are, in a way, interchangeable. What presents itself as immediate knowledge, notes Hegel, may on closer inspection turn out to be mediated, as when hard won mathematical discoveries become second nature for a mathematician (Hegel, 2019: §66). At the same time, observes Hegel, immediate knowledge tends to be regarded as in need of education (Hegel, 2019: §67). He connects this to the notion of innate ideas and the Platonic notion of *anamnesis*. Contrary to the presuppositions of major historical critics, innate knowledge may require an active unfolding through education (Hegel, 2019: §67R). This, then, is what the Hegelian dialectic looks like: some immediately held belief turns out to be negatable, the negation turns out to be specific to the negated, such that the negated is recognised to be a relative truth, that is, the moment of a more elaborate conceptual scheme, but this now more elaborate conceptual scheme is still not entirely adequate to the infinite and insofar as its particular finitudes are not yet realised, it occupies the stage of immediacy further down the dialectical line. And so the dialectic goes on and on, ascending towards Truth through an ongoing deepening of the body of thought.

## Dialectics and politics

What does all this mean for the way in which Hegel conceptualises the modern state? Hegel's notion of the Idea's self-realisation is inherently emancipatory, empowering the human individual. For, if humans are to complete the Idea's self-realisation, a realisation of which they are a part, they cannot find themselves lastingly opposed to the Idea. Thus, their way of life cannot be based on blind instinct, but has to be of their own making. Consequently, it will express their self-understanding. Gradually realising the Idea, not only human knowledge but also human social and political organisation will become more rational and right. Since this increase in rationality entails the overcoming of divisions between the human individuals and the Idea, the human individuals and nature, and the human individuals and their socio-political world, it is emancipatory. As Charles Taylor puts it, the end of this process of rationalisation is to heal the wound of an originally lost "communion with other men and nature" (Taylor, 2005: 76). For realisation is characterised by the positing of difference, and as such the human individual, in realising the Idea, is bound to find themselves confronted with a seemingly alien (natural and socio-political) reality. Unproblematic communion and community cannot last – or, to put things differently, immediacy inevitably gets disrupted. However, reality's alienness is ultimately overcome in the realisation that the divisions in question are actually moments of a differentiated unity.

However, Hegel's reworking of scepticism does engender what I call the "aporia of conscience", an aporia permeating Hegel's *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (*Elements of the Philosophy of Right*) from the end of its middle section on morality onwards. The aporia arises from the fact that, for Hegel, finitude is a necessary moment of reality, implying that human beings, being finite, are necessarily characterised by imperfection. The aporia of conscience articulates this insight with respect to human conscience (*Gewissen*), but the same aporetic dynamic holds for human cognition (*Wissen*) in general.

More precisely, the problem is as follows. For Hegel, the moral perspective is animated by a recognition of the distinction between the particular – such as my like or dislike for coriander – and the universal (Hegel, 2017: §104). As a moral subject, I consciously aspire to the universally good (Hegel, 2017: §133). I can only do so when I recognise that my preferences are not necessarily universal, i.e., when I recognise my own particularity and thus distinguish between the universal and the particular. Not only am I finite in space (as an individual) and time (as a born mortal), at least some of my evaluations are finite as well. When I want to do the right thing, I want to transcend that finitude.

According to Hegel, one's aspiring to universality does not guarantee one's attaining it. Hegel articulates this point clearly in a critique of Kant's categorical imperative. The categorical imperative is driven precisely by the aspiration to universality, for it puts a given content of the will – the "maxim" – to the test of universalizability. If the will could not be made into law without undermining itself, it is to be rejected (Kant, 1994: 65). The thief's maxim is an example of such a self-undermining will: if stealing were the norm, the institution of private property on which theft is predicated would be hollowed out. Stealing only works when it is exceptional, and thus it is morally wrong. But, objects Hegel, this presupposes that a particular institution *ought to be*: private property, the institution situating both the condemned act and its condemnation. In other words, the categorical imperative's formal demand is marked by an emptiness or incompleteness. The demand of universalizability cannot be the last word on morality, for, maintains Hegel, it presupposes what it purports to ground. In the end, Hegel (2017: §135R [p. 139]) claims hyperbolically, Kant's formalism can be used to justify any course of action: "alle unrechtliche und unmoralische Handlungsweise[n können] auf diese Weise gerechtfertigt werden" ("it is possible to justify any wrong or immoral code of action by this means"; Hegel, 2020a: §135R [p. 162]).

What Kant has discovered is not the ultimate moral yardstick, claims Hegel, but the formal structure of conscience, i.e., the faculty of willing and knowing the good (Hegel, 2017: §§136-37). But merely having a conscience (qua formal structure) is not enough; in order to will and know the good in a concrete situation and not just in abstracto, conscience has to be given content. The recognition of the distinction between

particularity and universality, however, leads to an aporia here. For how can I, as a finite subject, give myself this content? How can I be sure that I am not just glorifying my particular preferences, by presenting them as if they were universally good? According to Hegel, I cannot (Hegel, 2017: §140).

Hegel attempts to solve the problem with his notion of “Sittlichkeit” (ethical life). As a human individual, I find myself always already embedded in a collective existence. It is within this collective existence that my conscience acquires the content it requires. This collective existence Hegel calls ‘the state’, which entails, but is broader than what he calls the ‘political state’ – the legislation, the executive, the monarch and other typical political institutions (Hegel, 2017: §267). In this collective existence, conscience’s content is given as it is automatically, i.e., as custom or habit; it forms, so to speak, the presuppositions according to which I, as a member of this or that state, immediately live my life. Therefore, as Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde (2019a: 136) notes, the operation of conscience normally fades into the background. Hence, Hegel states that ethical life is like a second nature (Hegel, 2017: §151). It is in this second nature that human finitude is overcome, or is rendered finite itself.

In Hegel’s solution of the aporia of conscience, the state figures as the objectification of the good. In other words, the teleological self-realisation of the Idea animates the state, and consequently the state’s citizens. Given that the state precedes individual conscience and manifests the Idea, the state and its constitution are to be regarded as something divinely *given* rather than as something *manmade*:

Überhaupt [...] ist es schlechthin wesentlich, daß die Verfassung, obgleich in der Zeit hervorgegangen, nicht als ein gemachtes angesehen werde; denn sie ist vielmehr das schlechthin an und für sich Seiende, das darum als das Göttliche und Beharrende, und als über der Sphäre dessen, was gemacht wird, zu betrachten ist. (2017: §273R [p. 271])

(But it is [...] utterly essential that the constitution should *not* be regarded as *something made*, even if it does have an origin in time. On the contrary, it is quite simply that which has being in and for itself, and should therefore be regarded as divine and enduring, and as exalted above the sphere of all manufactured things. [Hegel, 2020a: §273R [p. 312]])

The solution to the aporia of conscience, then, demands that the state is understood in a political-theological fashion as the manifestation of supra-individual values.

Two things should be noted, however. First, for Hegel the state is to be compatible with freedom. This rests on the fact that, according to Hegel, the state’s and the individual’s free self-realisation ultimately coincide, given that in the final instance they are both realisations of the Idea. But Hegel’s account of the self-realisation of the Idea does entail both a vindication of the individual’s conscience and a vindication of

contingency qua contingency. For Hegel, the *differentia specifica* of the modern state lies in the freedom of conscience as well as in the distinction of family and civil society spheres. That is, the Hegelian modern state is built on the person's right to her or his own conscience, as well as to a private family life and to free association with other individuals in the economic sphere that Hegel calls "civil society" (Hegel, 2017 §§142ff.). Furthermore, the freedom that finds expression in this self-organising civil society is not merely private, for civil society is constitutive of Hegel's political state, in the sense that the different "estates" [*Stände*] and "corporations" [*Korporationen*], that (come to) make up civil society, are either directly present or indirectly represented in the political state as Hegel envisions it (§§273ff.). The details of this scheme need not concern us here. What matters is the general idea behind it, namely, that for Hegel the modern state allows for concrete freedom in three ways: i) by granting the individual their individual particularity (a vindication of contingency qua contingency), ii) by allowing individuals to pass over freely and automatically through their particular interests into the universal interest, and iii) by bringing individuals to freely, knowingly and willingly realise that the universal interest (embodied by the state) is, in fact, their own ultimate end (Hegel, 2017: §260) – and that this entails an organisation from "below" that is to be constitutive of state structures, policies and legislation "up above".

Second, as Hegel's passing remark in the last block quotation, "obgleich in der Zeit hervorgegangen" ("even if it does have an origin in time"), emphasises, the state is a *historical* entity. The state may objectify the Idea, but it remains finite. As a finite manifestation of the Idea, the state exists in the arena of world history. The business of world history is the realisation of World Spirit (*Weltgeist*), that is, the realisation of rationality – the Idea – in the form of the particular "spirits" animating and shaping states (Hegel, 2017: §§341-42). World history is driven by individuals: "An der Spitze aller Handlungen, somit auch der welthistorischen, stehen Individuen als die das Substantielle verwirklichenden Subjektivitäten" ("At the forefront of all actions, including world-historical actions, are *individuals* as the subjectivities by which the substantial is actualized"), but neither those individuals nor their contemporaries can *know* that they are actualising world spirit (Hegel, 2017: §348 [p. 331]; trans. Hegel, 2020a: §348 [p. 375]). Here, then, *the aporia of conscience resurfaces*, as a result of which the state's or state form's "origin in time" cannot be regarded as a moment of making, *even though individuals may end up founding states and state forms*.

Given Hegel's commitment to freedom of conscience and to free, yet politically not inconsequential organisation from "below" within the state, it seems not unreasonable to place the resurfaced aporia of conscience within the state as well, as the mechanism behind the business of reform. Such a reading of Hegel is further reinforced by Hegel's own commitment to reform. This commitment finds direct expression in several of his writings, especially some of his earlier writings (e.g., Hegel, 1986: 270), and indi-

rect expression in the fact that the modern state Hegel sketches in the *Philosophie des Rechts* resembles the end result of reforms, proposed in Hegel's day, much more than his contemporary status quo (Wood, 2020: ix-x).

The aporia of conscience and its reproduction thus seem to be constitutive of the modern state as Hegel envisions it. And it is precisely in the aporia of conscience that the politically destructive tendencies of scepticism re-emerge, albeit in a new light, namely as the movement to truer truths perceived through a glass darkly. This movement, and therefore the aporia of conscience, informs the interplay between immediacy and mediacy that drives the Hegelian dialectic. The world-historical actor – or, I would suggest, the reformer – breaks with ideas that are, in his time and place, simply and immediately assumed to be true. This entails a dissolution of communal ties, a rejection of what seemed to be *conditiones sine qua non* of ethical life, a negation of received truths, in favour of what appears to the world-historical actor as truer truth. In this way, limited standpoints, previously habitually absolutized, come into view, driving the dialectical progression towards truth. Thus, the progression towards truth is driven by the articulation of appearances of truth, of that which appears as truth through a glass darkly, and this articulation also always constitutes a loss, which is where the destructiveness of scepticism re-emerges.

## From Hegel to post-truth politics

What does Hegel's reworking of scepticism mean for our contemporary situation? More specifically, what does it mean for the question of post-truth politics?

We may approach the question negatively, by outlining two possible reasons for doubting whether Hegel's rethinking of scepticism has any contemporary relevance. First, Hegel's reworking of scepticism seems to be inextricably connected to his philosophical system. Would we not need to be Hegelians for it to mean anything to us?

Second, Hegel's modern state is explicitly Christian. This much is clear when, in the *Philosophie des Rechts*, Hegel imposes two restrictions on the expression of the contents of conscience, the ultimate scope of which he leaves open, nevertheless. First, he demands that the citizens of the modern state are Christians, for in Hegel's eyes Christianity is the only religion which – due to the dogma of the Incarnation, which can be read as a revelation of the divinity inherent in the human individual (cf. Shanks, 2008) – can grasp the Absolute in such a way as to recognise the right of individual conscience (Hegel, 2017: §270R). Second, he demands that (religious) doctrine – or more generally: the contents of conscience – , insofar as it finds expression, supports the modern state. The modern state may and, as far as possible, should tolerate doctrines that do not support it, but it will inevitably be at odds with them (Hegel, 2017: §270R).

Here, then, lies a crucial difference between Hegel's modern state and contemporary liberal-democratic states. For, in contemporary liberal-democratic states the principle of freedom of conscience has been radicalised, resulting in the religiously neutral state. The spiritual foundations of this state have, notes Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde in a discussion of the relation between state and religion in Hegel, become precarious (2019a: 141). As Böckenförde puts it elsewhere:

*Der freiheitliche, säkularisierte Staat lebt von Voraussetzungen, die er selbst nicht garantieren kann. Das ist das große Wagnis, das er, um der Freiheit willen, eingegangen ist. (Böckenförde, 2019b: 112)*

*(The freedom-oriented, secularised state lives off presuppositions that it cannot itself guarantee. That is the great venture that the state, for the sake of freedom, has embarked upon. [my translation])*

Does the “great venture” Böckenförde mentions not entail a loss of common ground which renders the Hegelian state's ability to cope with a plurality of irreconcilable “truths” thoroughly unavailable to our states in our times? Perhaps, but not necessarily. At this point, we can read Hegel, the opposite way, as a thinker who seeks to unearth what the modern state demands of its precarious foundations. On such a reading, Hegel's philosophical system and his reworked Christianity simply happen to fit the picture and, if we find ourselves unable to accept them, challenge us to articulate alternatives or to face the fact that the modern state's foundations may be precarious to the point of crisis.

What basic demands of the modern state does Hegel uncover? Hegel's state is essentially founded on an acceptance of three theses:

1. There is Truth.
2. All human beings are finite, i.e., incapable of knowing that their *particular* viewpoint articulates the *universal* (the True, the Good) and bound to articulate the universal *imperfectly*.
3. All human beings are capable of attaining the universal (the True, the Good).

The acceptance of thesis (1) is required to overcome the politically destructive tendencies of scepticism. Without it, the validity of norms, laws, and values, as well as all common ground and, ultimately, the validity of the polity itself, falls away. But if freedom of conscience, in some form or other, is to be regarded as something more than a dangerous unsettling of validities just regained through the acceptance of thesis (1), thesis (3) will have to be accepted, too.

However, if one only accepts theses (3) and (1), the existence of a plurality of irreconcilable “truths” becomes problematic. Either one has to reject at least thesis (3) after all, or one has to provide an account of why those who seem not to know the truth fail to do so. Perhaps they are opportunistic liars, or perhaps they are only potentially

capable of knowing the truth, but actually hindered in attaining it. The danger here is that freedom of conscience is rejected with a vengeance of which no aristocratic authoritarianism would be capable.

The acceptance of thesis (2) solves this situation. The combination of theses (2) and (3) effectively introduces the aporia of conscience. Because of this, an irreconcilable plurality of “truths” can be regarded as the way in which an ethical community collectively attains to Truth, rather than as incompatible with Truth or with the Truth-directedness of (part of) humanity.

In other words, if Hegel is correct in his assessment, the aporia of conscience marks a tension constitutive of contemporary liberal-democratic states – that is, states embracing freedom of conscience and allowing for a degree of organisation from “below” on this basis. In that case, these states strongly rely on a public culture that is simultaneously optimistic about the general human ability to attain to Truth, and cautious about every individual human’s ability to know what is True.

On the one hand, then, contemporary democratic states are bound to give rise to, and rely on a degree of optimism regarding the existence of a plurality of irreconcilable truths – even though this plurality will necessarily be unsettling, followed by the shadow of a loss of communal life. In part, post-truth phenomena thus belong to these states, and the phenomenon of scepticism represents an ever-present possibility as the plurality of seemingly irreconcilable truths may always drive individuals to a suspension of judgment.

On the other hand, however, the public culture required to maintain the tension (the aporia of conscience) constitutive of contemporary liberal-democratic states presupposes that “we”, i.e., the citizens of contemporary liberal-democratic states, are, and perceives *ourselves* to be, “still trying”. It presupposes, in other words, that we take truth seriously, and that we neither pessimistically succumb to scepticism nor cynically attempt to render truth irrelevant, or relevant only insofar as power may be a function of truth claims. If post-truth “amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not” (McIntyre, 2018: 13), we may end up with a plurality of “truths” that even Hegel cannot reconcile.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, in the wake of poststructuralism and the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein, that is, in what is often termed a “postmodern” situation, the very idea of “truth” may seem to slip away. But what these philosophies mainly do is they show the finitude of language and, consequently, of thought and of linguistically constructed things like identities. We can only have the world through finite categories. However, in a somewhat Kantian fashion the idea of a world more or less compatible with our conceptual frameworks may be retained (e.g., Mouffe, 2013a, 2013b), although the relationships of our statements to this world can now only be the ones of showing (*zeigen*) and not the ones of saying (*sagen*) in the Wittgensteinian sense (Wittgenstein, 1966: 7, §6.522 [p. 115]). This

## Conclusion

Both scepticism and the concept of “post-truth” establish a connection between a plurality of irreconcilable “truths” and a certain disregard for the truth. In post-truth politics, we seem to enter a vicious circle where untrue “truths” thrive and proliferate; in ancient scepticism, a plurality of irreconcilable yet equally plausible truths leads to *epoché*, suspension of judgment. Post-truth politics tend to be viewed as politically destructive politics. One may expect scepticism to be politically destructive, too. Georg W. F. Hegel thought it was, but nevertheless held both the modern state and ancient scepticism in high regard.

Hegel valued scepticism as the realisation of the self-contradictory nature of all finite standpoints. But he reproached scepticism for overstepping its boundaries. What scepticism misses is that the quest for truth and goodness is the quest for something that transcends particularity and decay, that is, something infinite, and that the infinite includes *all* negation and can, as such, not be negated. Thus, Hegel reworks scepticism into dialectics: the logical movement through self-contradictory positions to truer truth. Underlying his dialectics is the idea that the infinite must realise itself in finite reality if it is to be truly infinite, and that this realisation must involve a spiritual integration of difference back into unity. This is what underlies the human pursuit of knowledge.

In Hegel’s eyes, ancient scepticism’s shortcoming is that it remains stuck in a finite viewpoint and consequently in its merely negative activity. Such a scepticism, Hegel acknowledges, is politically destructive, for it undermines the validity of all ethical standards, displaces common ground, and disrupts the polity’s political-theological pre-eminence. Hegel’s reworking of ancient scepticism can be read as an attempt to remedy this situation. However, the politically destructive tendencies of scepticism re-emerge – albeit in a transformed and positively evaluated manner – insofar as the ascension to truer truth and truer community always entails a break with old, immediately presupposed truths. It is in these terms that Hegel understands the existence of a plurality of irreconcilable “truths” – but these “truths” are irreconcilable only insofar as their untruths have not yet been comprehended. For Hegel, this dynamic is foundational to the modern state, i.e., the state that embraces freedom of conscience.

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can be done not only for the empirical world of sense-experience, but also for the good. In that case, then, the infinite may remain in the sense in which the younger Wittgenstein (1966: §6.522 [p. 115]) articulated its remainder: “*Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische.*” (“There is, indeed, the ineffable. This shows itself, it is the mystical” [my translation].) In that case, contemporary philosophy need not abandon the idea of the infinite – that is, the postmodern and the True need not exclude each other – and the contemporary philosophical challenge vis-à-vis phenomena like post-truth may be to redo the Hegelian endeavour of reconciling plurality with the infinite in light of more recent discoveries of human finitude.



Hegel conceptualises the modern state as resting on three theses. First, the modern state presupposes that there is Truth – for otherwise it would fall victim to the politically destructive tendencies of scepticism. Second, it presupposes that all human beings are finite – for otherwise it would be possible to demand uniformity within the state, i.e., to demand the simple abolishment of a plurality of truths. Third, it presupposes that all human beings are capable of attaining to truth and goodness – otherwise it would fall victim to the politically destructive tendencies of scepticism, anyway, or would have to seek refuge in some kind of aristocracy.

What does this mean for the question of post-truth politics? Hegel attempts to partially sever the link between the two phenomena connected by the concept of “post-truth”: a plurality of irreconcilable “truths”, and a certain disregard for (the) truth. In doing so, Hegel simultaneously shows that the existence of a plurality of (prima facie) irreconcilable “truths” fundamentally belongs to the modern state, and that the modern state demands that this plurality is elaborated within a particular context, namely, a context in which truth as such is believed in and valued. Pluralism, however unsettling it may be, has to be greeted with faith. The question for contemporary politics is, then, whether such a context can, somehow, be maintained or, if it is already lost, regained.

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## Skepticizam i moderna država u mislima Georga W. F. Hegela

### *Sažetak*

I koncept „post-istine” i antički skepticizam povezuju mnoštvo nepomirljivih „istina” s određenim nepoštivanjem istine. Fenomene post-istine često se smatra politički štetnima. Ovaj rad govori o tome kako Georg W. F. Hegel preispituje antički skepticizam kako bi se otklonili slični štetni učinci, pokazuje da Hegelova misao sugerira da mnoštvo nepomirljivih „istina” ne mora isključiti vjeru u istinu, te da moderna država počiva na oboma.

**Ključne riječi:** Georg W. F. Hegel, moderna država, antički skepticizam, post-istina, istina, sloboda savjesti