

2020

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Recommended Citation

Schwabe, Ben (2020) "Hegel's Two Faces of Patriotism: War and the Modern Liberal State," *Acta Cogitata: An Undergraduate Journal in Philosophy*. Vol. 8 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://commons.emich.edu/ac/vol8/iss1/4>

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Hegel's Two Faces of Patriotism: War and the Modern Liberal State

Ben Schwabe

A survey of the actions and rhetoric of the most influential contemporary international governance organizations would suggest that the greatest possible attainment of world peace is the highest goal of the modern world. The largest strain of modern political philosophy tends to concur: Hobbes' commonwealth's existence is justified by its provision of an escape from the state of war, Locke too seeks peace to protect life, liberty and property, and Kant lays out most explicitly the project and conditions for perpetual peace. Courage, among other virtues associated with the act of war, falls out of favor in the moral philosophy of these authors; the person who perfectly follows the natural moral laws which Hobbes presents in *Leviathan* and *De Cive* is an easygoing, pacified citizen. However, there is a tradition of dissent to the praise of peace amongst the moderns. Rousseau excoriates the death of military virtue and argues for its importance for the political health of a society. Nietzsche, writing after Hegel, despises the deadening of human life within the pacified commercial societies of the modern world and returns courage to a place of preeminence. Even at the birth of modernity sits Machiavelli, who viewed war as necessary for the preservation of political vitality. It is this tradition which Hegel will draw on in order to answer the problem of legitimation which war poses to the modern liberal state.

The problem is this: how can a state grounded in the protection of the individual rights to life and liberty justify the claim that it is the duty of the citizen to participate in war, and thus risk everything for the sake of the preservation or even simply the interest of the state? Hegel tackles this problem within the *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* by giving a dual account of patriotism and the duties of the citizen to the state. In the first, Hegel stresses that the patriotic

feeling arises from the recognition that the state is the precondition for the fulfillment of individual welfare. In the second, Hegel argues that “sacrifice on behalf of the individuality of the state” both defines the relationship of citizens to each other and is the essential duty of the citizen (308). These two accounts appear to be in tension, for the duty of sacrifice seems to render precarious that security and welfare which legitimates the state and thus one’s duties to it. However, a deeper analysis of these two accounts reveals that sacrifice in war is a higher expression of freedom than the pursuit of individual interest and that both wartime and peacetime have unique importance for the health of a state and the actualization of freedom.

To understand Hegel’s two accounts of the patriotic relation between the subject and the state, one must first understand his conception of the state itself. Hegel argues that it is the invention of the modern State which enables human beings to attain the highest form of freedom. In antiquity the will of the state claimed to override the wills of particular subjects, and thus suppressed individual freedom, whereas in modern times “we lay claim to our own views, our own willing and our own conscience...” (237). The modern state solves the tension between the will of the state and of the individual because within it there is a complete coincidence of the duties and rights of citizens. Such a coincidence occurs because the existence of the state is the “sole prerequisite of the attainment of particular ends and welfare”, and thus to fulfill one’s duty to the state is at the same time to affirm one’s right to the liberty to pursue such ends (238).

Upon this vision of the modern state Hegel grounds his two accounts of patriotism and the duty that a citizen owes the state. In the first, Hegel argues that patriotism is merely the product of the subject’s habitual action in conformity with the institutions of the state, because such action actualizes the rationality of the state (240). The subject, who observes that acting

within the state's institutions allows them to freely pursue their interest, becomes aware of the coincidence of duty and right in the state. This engenders in the subject trust in institutions and the "consciousness that my interest, both substantial and particular, is contained and preserved in another's (i.e. in the state's) interest and end..." (240). Through this relation, the state no longer appears as an Other who restricts action, but appears as an extension of the individual, and thus the fulfillment of duty, the willing of the state and its institutions' existence, appears to the individual as the free willing of their own interest, and in this relation the individual is free (240).

But patriotism, the political disposition, is a disposition towards something. The content of patriotism, Hegel asserts, is derived from "the various aspects of the organism of the state..." (241). The organism of the state, that is, the political constitution, is "the development of the Idea to its differences and objective actuality..." (241). The Idea, for Hegel, is the ultimate purpose of the world, the manifestation of God's will in the world: human freedom (Reason In History, 21-22). The story of history is the story of the dialectical progress towards the realization of human freedom, and at each stage in history, freedom as it is then understood is actualized in the institutions of states. The totality of these institutions within a state thus composes the political constitution of that state. And so to the extent that patriotism exists in any state, that patriotism manifests as a disposition towards freedom as encoded in the institutions of the state.

In sum, Hegel's first account of patriotism is that it is a disposition towards the particular institutions of a state due to the fact that participation in such institutions furthers the interests of the individual. But, this is not Hegel's last word on the relation between the citizen and the state. Hegel asserts that, taken together, the different ways in which freedom is developed and manifested within the institutions of a state constitutes the individuality of the state (305). But

regardless of whether the constitution of a state is considered legitimate by its citizens, the individuality of a state only comes into being through recognition by other individuals, that is, by other states (311-312). Further, the individuality of the state is part of a developing process of self-negation, that is, the state's individuality develops through the subordination of particular interests to the universal, abstract freedom of the state and its institutions (305). This development takes the form of a series of entanglements "with contingent events that *come from without*", that is in struggles for recognition with other states (305). Thus in a situation where the individuality of the state comes under threat, sacrifice on behalf of the state "is a universal duty..." (308). That is, the citizens, who are disposed towards the institutions and thus the individuality of the states, are subjected to the duty to preserve those institutions at all costs. The relationship between the citizen and the state here appears to emphasize the absolute power of the latter over the former, as the lives of the citizens must be traded for the sake of the state.

In each account, Hegel suggests a tension between these two ideas of patriotism. In the first account, Hegel contrasts his conception of patriotism with the assertion that patriotism is only the "readiness for exceptional sacrifices and actions..." (240). While this is certainly a part of patriotism, Hegel states that this conception neglects the fact that the foundation of all such sacrifices is the habitual recognition that "the community is one's substantial basis and end..." (241). Yet the second account is centered around the universal duty to sacrifice that individual welfare for the state. Further, in the second account, Hegel states that to mistake the state for civil society and regard "its final end as only the security of individual life and property" produces an entirely distorted conception of the state (306). But, in the first account, the patriotic sentiment seemed to arise precisely from the state's ability to preserve civil society! There thus appears to be a tension between the genesis of patriotism and its duties. However, this tension

disappears in the full development of the patriotic disposition: patriotism originally arises from the state's ability to secure particular interests, but the state's demand for individual sacrifice allows the individual to transcend pursuit of interest and attain a higher form of freedom.

First, Hegel suggests that we must distinguish between the ordinary and extraordinary conditions of the state. These are times of peace and times of war, respectively. Hegel argues that the condition of the state has an important psychological effect on citizens. The patriotic disposition arises in the normal situation: "it is the disposition which, in the relationships of our daily life and under ordinary conditions, habitually recognizes that the community is one's substantial basis and end..." (241). However, while normalcy engenders such a disposition, this disposition often only takes root at a semi-conscious level; our habituation to the exercise of freedom within the state prevents us from reflecting "on just how this is due solely to the working of particular institutions..." (241). Patriotism thus takes its initial form in the individual as an underlying contentment with the state. The extraordinary situation, war, has the opposite effect. In war, the insecurity of our temporal goods "actually comes on the scene in all seriousness in the form of hussars with shining sabres..." (308). Hegel notes that the lesson we hear so often from religious leaders, that of the futility of dedication to temporal goods, does not truly resonate with us in ordinary situations: "everyone thinks, however much he is moved by what he hears, that he at least will be able to retain his own..." (308). But the imminent potential destruction of the state which war brings about makes this message finally hit home for the citizen. In the moment where the individuality of the state comes under threat and thus the goods which the citizen had taken for granted are made manifestly insecure, the citizen becomes able to understand a freedom higher than the freedom to pursue one's own particular interest.

The patriot thus exercises a higher freedom than the pursuit of individual interest in the courageous sacrifice of self in the name of the state. Hegel argues that “in itself, courage is a formal virtue, because (i) it is the highest abstraction of freedom from all particular ends, possessions, pleasures, and life (though it negates them in a matter that is external and actual); and (ii) their alienation or abandonment...” (309). By this, Hegel means that the action of risking one’s life or material welfare for a cause has the potential to be a virtue because it is a free act unconstrained by material concerns. However, this action is done for a specific cause, and the nobility of that cause is what determines the extent to which the expression of courage is good. For example, if one shows courage in attaining their subsistence or for the purpose of gaining honor “these are not true forms of courage...” (309). The true form of courage, which is simultaneously the highest expression of freedom, is the willingness to risk one’s self for the existence of the state. “The important thing here is not personal mettle but aligning oneself with the universal”, that is, in sacrifice on behalf of the state, the particular individual abstracts from their concrete existence and becomes a representative of the universal whole (308). In doing so, the various individuals within the state together affirm their allegiance to the state, and so truly relate to each other as citizens.

But in order for it to be true that sacrifice on behalf of the modern state is the universal duty of the citizen, it must also be true that the citizen asserts their rights in this sacrifice. That duty and right do coincide in sacrifice is displayed by the implications of true courage. It has already been asserted that the constitution of a state, which the citizen becomes disposed towards, is that particular state’s expression of human freedom. When two states come into conflict with each other in a struggle for recognition, this manifestation of freedom is under threat. By displaying true courage, that is freely choosing to act in the interest of the state despite

the material and bodily risks, the citizen is freely willing the existence of freedom as encoded in these institutions: “this determination whereby the rights and interests of individuals are posited as a vanishing moment, is at the same time something positive, i.e. the positing not of their contingent, changing individuality, but of their individuality in and for itself” (305). The highest expression of freedom thus only becomes possible in wartime, because only then is there an opportunity for true courage and only then do citizens come to internalize the futility of sole concern with their own interests.

What Hegel points to in the apparent tension between these two conceptions of the relationship between citizens and the state is the importance of the realization of both. The supremacy of true courage over the freedom to pursue individual interest might always suggest that a state seek war, but this is clearly false. Hegel's insistence that the security of individual freedom to pursue interest is the foundation of patriotism displays that to always be engaged in war would rot away at the legitimacy of the state (240). On the other hand, perpetual peace is also undesirable, because “in peace civil life continually expands; all its spheres become firmly established, and in the long run people stagnate...” (307). If the insecurity of goods does not present itself to the citizenry, as it does in war, then people will lose sight of the limits of particular interest and the bonds of citizenship, which are affirmed by sacrifice, wither away. If this occurs over the long-term, the result is the regression of true political society into simply a governed society of self-interested actors. With this expansion of economic life comes a loss of a conception of politics and the political life, and with that a limitation on human potential. The necessity but insufficiency of each part of patriotism thus counsels neither perpetual peace nor endless war but the virtue of periodic times of strife.

Hegel's argument thus attempts to display that there is not truly any tension between the liberal state's emphasis on the protection of individual rights and the contention that sacrifice for country in war is a duty of citizenship; in this way, he moderately detaches himself from the main thrust of the liberal tradition. However, Hegel's purported reconciliation leaves us with at least two areas of concern. First, even if Hegel is correct that periods of peace are damaging, it appears strikingly immoral on face to engage in war simply for the sake of vitalizing political life; this sort of action might be presented by other liberal thinkers as reckless endangerment and legitimate grounds for revolution. Second, we might doubt that liberal, market-based societies would decay so quickly in the absence of war. At the very least, active participation in politics would seem to allow a sect of the population the potential to devote themselves to the care and transformation of the political constitution, that is, the manifestation of freedom in the state. The weight of political decisions might be said to serve a similar, if less drastic consciousness-raising role as the prospect of war does and the action of political decision-making could be understood as the free willing of freedom. Active political participation might thus render the benefit of war unnecessary, or at least less important. But concerns aside, Hegel's thoughtful treatment of the two-sided nature of patriotism allows us to more clearly approach and hopefully begin to understand the relationship between war and the foundations of the modern state.

Works Cited

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