
The Logic of Self-Realization in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*

La lógica de la autorrealización en la *Filosofía del Derecho* de Hegel

ABSTRACT: The concept of “self-realization” plays a central role in philosophy, since it summarizes the idea that a good life is a flourishing life, that is, an existence in which a person makes the best of what she is. A long tradition has understood this in terms of actualizing one’s potential or fulfilling one’s highest and most worthy aspirations. The aim of this paper is to analyze Hegel’s Logic and Philosophy of Right, in order to show that they outline an alternative and valuable account of self-realization that conceives of human flourishing as tied to the flourishing of the world.

KEYWORDS: SELF-REALIZATION; LOGIC; PHILOSOPHY OF RIGHT; IDEA; FREE WILL.

RESUMEN: El concepto de «autorrealización» desempeña un papel central en la filosofía, ya que resume la idea de que una vida buena es una vida floreciente, es decir, una existencia en la que la persona saca lo mejor de lo que es. Una larga tradición ha entendido esto en términos de actualización del propio potencial o de realización de las aspiraciones más elevadas y dignas. El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar la Lógica y la Filosofía del Derecho de Hegel, para mostrar que esbozan un relato alternativo y valioso de la autorrealización que concibe el florecimiento humano como ligado al florecimiento del mundo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: AUTORREALIZACIÓN; LÓGICA; FILOSOFÍA DEL DERECHO; IDEA; VOLUNTAD LIBRE.

I. INTRODUCTION

FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD ONWARD, one of the central tasks of philosophy has been to investigate the problem of self-realization, that is, the question of how human beings can flourish, pursuing the ends they value, actualizing their capacities and fulfilling their highest and most worthy aspirations.¹ This problem is closely related to the question of the good life, that is, the question: “how should we live?”. One of the most important answers given focuses on self-realization: a life can be regarded as good, and therefore worth living, to the extent that a person makes the best of what she is, as an individual or as a member of the human species.²

This idea can be analyzed by distinguishing between two main concerns: the first is the *structure* of self-realization; the second is its *content*. By “structure” I mean here the formal modes through which self-realization occurs; by “content” I mean the practices and contexts that implement this structure. For example, from a structural point of view, self-realization is often understood as a process of self-expression or actualization of an inner potential; this process, from a content point of view, is identified with things like work, love, artistic creativity, and political activism.

The aim of my paper is to defend two claims in light of the above. The first is to highlight that these issues play a central role in Hegel’s philosophy. The second is to argue that Hegel’s account of self-realization is highly original and still deserves our attention today. More specifically, I will try to show that with reference to my proposed distinction the originality of the Hegelian conception lies in its *structural* features – namely, in what I call the “logic of self-realization.” As far as *content* is concerned, on the other hand, I think that Hegel’s account is not as original and therefore I will not deal with it.³

[1] According to some interpreters, the emphasis on self-realization is an eminently modern phenomenon, which must be thought of in conjunction with concepts such as moral autonomy and artistic creativity, or with the rise of liberalism in the political domain. In my view, however, it is possible to understand in terms of (non-individualistic) self-realization also ancient philosophy’s ideal of the good life as flourishing of the properties and abilities that all human beings essentially share (Aristotle’s notion of *eudaimonia* is exemplary of this). For a philosophical history of these topics see TAYLOR, Ch., *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press 1989.

[2] For a systematic examination of this issue and its ethical implications cf. GEWIRTH, A., *Self-Fulfillment*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press 1998. See also ALTOBRANDO, A., NIKAWA, T., STONE, R. (eds.), *The Realizations of the Self*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2018.

[3] In my opinion, Hegel’s account of self-realization, insofar as it involves the development of rationality in its various configurations, presents in content many affinities especially with Aristotle’s conception. On the topic of self-realization in Hegel’s practical philosophy cf. WOOD, A.W., *Hegel’s Ethical Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990, ch. 1; SIEP,

I proceed as follows: (II) I first present the conception of self-realization that Hegel outlines in the *Logic*⁴; (III) I then show how this has important consequences for Hegel's theory of the free will in the *Philosophy of Right*; (IV) in the concluding remarks, I emphasize the aspects of Hegel's account of self-realization that, in my opinion, are most significant and up to date.⁵

II. THE STRUCTURE OF SELF-REALIZATION IN THE *LOGIC*

In order to shed light on what I have called the "structure of self-realization," it is first necessary to turn to Hegel's *Logic*, and in particular to the sections on the idea of the good and the absolute idea.

To begin, it is important to briefly recall what Hegel means by "idea."⁶ In the *Encyclopedia*, he defines it as "the absolute unity of the concept and objectivity" (*E*, § 213). This definition sums up some key points: the idea is the "concept" (*Begriff*), i.e., the rationality that pervades and organizes "objectivity," thereby guaranteeing intelligibility to the world and animating the human practices of thought and action. Accordingly, the idea for Hegel does not mean, as in everyday language, an "idea of something" (*E*, § 213 A). Likewise, it is not an abstract entity opposed to the empirical world, as is the case in Plato, nor is

L., "Selbstverwirklichung, Anerkennung und politische Existenz. Zur Aktualität der politischen Philosophie Hegels", in Id., *Aktualität und Grenzen der praktischen Philosophie Hegels. Aufsätze 1997-2009*. München: Fink 2010, pp. 131-146; STERN, R., "Freedom, Norms and Nature in Hegel: Self-Legislation or Self-Realization?", in R. ZUCKERT and J. KREINES (eds.), *Hegel on Philosophy in History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017, pp. 88-105; GLEESON, L. and Ikäheimo, H., "Hegelian Perfectionism and Freedom", in D. MOGGACH, N. MOOREN and M. QUANTE (eds.), *Perfektionismus der Autonomie*. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink 2020, pp. 163-182.

[4] In what follows, by "*Logic*" (in italics) I mean both Hegel's work *Science of Logic* (1812-1816) and the first part of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830). By "*Philosophy of Right*" I mean only the work *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820), since I do not deal with the *Encyclopedia* version, i.e. the "Philosophy of Objective Spirit".

[5] I refer to the critical edition of Hegel's works of the *Gesammelte Werke*. Redacted by the Nordrhein-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften with support from the Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft. Hamburg: Meiner 1968 ff. I use the following translations: *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Ed. by A.W. WOOD. Tr. by H.B. NISBET. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991 (abbreviated *PhR*); *The Science of Logic*. Ed. and tr. by G. DI GIOVANNI. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010 (abbreviated *SL*); *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I: Science of Logic*. Ed. and tr. by K. BRINKMANN and D.O. DAHLSTROM. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010 (abbreviated *E*). References are given directly in the text by page of the critical edition, followed by that of the English translation, or by the indication of the paragraph, which applies to both versions. The letter A stands for Annotation to a paragraph.

[6] For a comprehensive analysis see STER, L., "Die Lehre vom Begriff. Dritter Abschnitt. Die Idee", in M. QUANTE and N. MOOREN (eds.), *Kommentar zu Hegels Wissenschaft der Logik*. Hamburg: Meiner 2018, pp. 651-796.

it the ought as opposed to being, as in Kant. For Hegel, the idea is rather the world, both natural and social, as a substance that knows and determines itself. It is, therefore, both ontological and epistemological in scope: it is the structure that organizes both reality and the knowledge of reality.⁷

The *Logic* analyzes different configurations of this structure, and the idea of the good and the absolute idea are two of them. They are important for my discussion because they can be understood, respectively, as a *negative variant* and a *positive variant* of self-realization. This means – to put it very synthetically – that the idea of the good tells us how self-realization is *not* to be conceived; while the absolute idea provides us with a stronger and more coherent account. I will present briefly both of these variants.

II.1. THE IDEA OF THE GOOD AS A NEGATIVE VARIANT OF SELF-REALIZATION

Hegel divides the Doctrine of the Idea into three sections: idea of life (i.e., the immediate identity of concept and objectivity), idea of cognition (i.e., the separation of concept and objectivity) and absolute idea (i.e., the full unity of concept and objectivity, that is, the reinstatement of the identity through the separation). The idea of the good is an internal moment of the idea of cognition.

Hegel defines the idea of knowing as “the differentiation of the idea in itself” (*E*, § 224), that is, as the “rupture” of the immediate unity that characterizes the idea of life. This rupture implies both the separation between concept and objectivity, and the attempt to overcome this separation, and thereby achieve a new, more rational unity.

This “twofold” movement of the idea of cognition also characterizes the idea of the good, which Hegel defines as “the *practical* activity of the idea,” and also calls “*willing* [*das Wollen*]” (*E*, § 225) or “*acting* [*das Handeln*]” (*SL*, 230 [729]). Indeed, on the one hand, the idea of the good is shaped by the internal separation between the concept and objectivity, which is understood here as the opposition between rational subjectivity and an external, worthless reality. Hegel even presents this separation in terms of two opposing worlds:

one [is] a realm of subjectivity in the pure spaces of transparent thought, the other [is] a realm of objectivity in the element of an externally manifold actuality, an impervious realm of darkness. (*SL*, 233 [731])

[7] On these topics cf. ILLETTERATI, L., “Der einzige Inhalt der Philosophie. Ontologie und Epistemologie in Hegels Begriff der Wirklichkeit”, in F. MENEGONI and L. ILLETTERATI (eds.), *Wirklichkeit. Beiträge zu einem Schlüsselbegriff der Hegelschen Philosophie*. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann 2018, pp. 11-42.

On the other hand, the idea of the good strives to overcome this opposition. Hegel therefore defines it as “the drive of the *good* to bring itself about” (*E*, § 225) or “the *impulse* to realize itself” (*SL*, 231 [729]): it is, in other words, the attempt of reason to make itself actual and shape objective reality. In this way, rationality, as will or action, seeks to overcome the separation with external reality and “unite” with it. However, to the extent that it *presupposes* the separation between subjectivity and objectivity, this process of self-realization of the idea of the good is doomed to failure. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel writes:

The realized good is good by virtue of what it already is in the subjective purpose, in its idea; the realization gives it an external existence, but since this existence has only the status of an externality which is in and for itself null, what is good in it has attained only an accidental, fragile existence, not a realization corresponding to the idea. (*SL*, 232 [731])

The idea of the good fails because it understands self-realization as an *extrinsic* process in which a subjective, inner goal must be actualized externally, that is, “projected” onto the world which is conceived of as in itself a realm devoid of rationality and purpose, as a mere constraint to subjective agency. But within such a framework, self-realization can produce nothing but a fragmented (“accidental, fragile”) good. The emptiness of the world turns back on rationality itself, since rationality actualized in this way can no longer have its original value.⁸

This provides us with a first, important outcome. Self-realization cannot consist for Hegel in a process of actualizing an inner potential – as it is often held to be –, that is, it cannot be the mere projection of an inner goal onto external objectivity.

II.2. THE ABSOLUTE IDEA AS A POSITIVE VARIANT OF SELF-REALIZATION

This negative variant of self-realization is overcome in the transition to the absolute idea. The failure of the idea of the good, in fact, implies the shift to an account that no longer opposes rationality to objective reality. However, the unification of reason and world that is achieved in the absolute idea does not mean pure identity. As is always the case in Hegel, the overcoming of a difference does not eliminate it, but *transforms* it. Hence, the overcoming of the idea of the good leads to what we might conceive of as a *dialectical* unity of reason and reality. This unity is “dialectical” because it consists in a relation

[8] On these issues and, more generally, for a detailed analysis of the idea of the good, let me refer to MANCHISI, A., “Die Idee des Guten bei Hegel: Eine metaethische Untersuchung” in *Hegel-Studien* 55, 2021, pp. 11-40.

of mutual dependence between the two sides of the idea. This becomes clear in the final sentence of the chapter on the idea of the good in the *Science of Logic*:

the previously discovered reality is at the same time determined as the realized absolute purpose, no longer [...] [as] a merely objective world without the subjectivity of the concept, but as an objective world whose inner ground and actual subsistence is rather the concept. This is the absolute idea. (*SL*, 235 [734])

The overcoming of the idea of the good outlines a theoretical framework in which reality is no longer an external constraint to subjectivity, but is properly an “objective world” that *embeds* “subjectivity” – and indeed, we could say that it is “objective world” only *to the extent* that it embeds subjectivity. It is therefore a reality that, insofar as it has the concept as its “inner ground and actual subsistence,” is intrinsically rational.

If we look at this framework in the light of the problem of self-realization, we can then say that, the absolute idea does not consist in a dynamic of projection, since concept and objectivity are no longer understood as separate dimensions. It is rather a dynamic of *interaction*, that is, a process in which the two sides of the idea require each other to “fulfill” themselves. And this means that the subject, by acting rationally, namely by “having the world in view” (to quote a nice expression by John McDowell), not only realizes her capacities, but also contributes to making the world itself “flourish,” that is, to making its rationality emerge.

III. THE STRUCTURE OF SELF-REALIZATION IN THE *PHILOSOPHY OF RIGHT*

At this point, what I have called Hegel’s “logic of self-realization” should be clearer. In order to understand the implications of this logic for Hegel’s social and political views, we can now turn to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, and in particular to the paragraphs of the Introduction. With respect to the problem on which I am focusing, these paragraphs are important for two reasons: the first is that Hegel here outlines his theory of the free will; the second is that this theory develops, on the level of social relationships, the understanding of self-realization as interaction that we saw in the *Logic*.

III.1. HEGEL’S THEORY OF THE FREE WILL

First of all, what is at stake in Hegel’s theory of free will? The most effective answer to this question can be found in § 4 of *Elements*:

The basis of right is the *realm of spirit* in general and its precise location and point of departure is the *will*; the will is *free*, so that freedom constitutes its substance and destiny and the system of right is the realm of actualized freedom.

The free will is for Hegel the principle that organizes the whole complex of right in the broad sense, that is, of the “social world.”⁹ This means that every norm, action, practice or institution must be understood as an expression of the work of the will, namely, as the way through which human beings act in order to ensure a world in which to fulfill themselves both individually and collectively.

On my reading, the self-realization of the free will presents the same characteristics that we have highlighted in reference to the absolute idea in the *Logic*. This is evident if we examine Hegel's analysis of the structure of the will in the *Philosophy of Right*: being rational, the will realizes itself according to the scheme of the concept, that is, through the dialectic between universal, particular, and individual. This dialectic is presupposed in the analysis of the idea in the *Logic*, but it is not addressed explicitly (since it was analyzed extensively in the first part of the Doctrine of Concept), and therefore the paragraphs of the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right* allow us to explore a key point of Hegel's concept of self-realization. Let us briefly look at this dialectic.

The first determination of the structure of the free will is “*universality*” (*PhR*, § 5), that is, detachment from particular “needs, desires, and drives”: it is the distance of subjects from themselves and their own inclinations. Universality is therefore the “*absolute abstraction*” from any context of action.

Yet, the will is free only insofar as it is capable of “*positing* [...] a determinacy as a content and object” (*PhR*, § 6), that is, of evaluating, weighing reasons, and pursuing determined ends. It is, therefore, not only abstraction, i.e., elevation to universal principles or norms, but also “*particularization*,” that is, the activity of “*differentiation*.” For subjects, this is the condition for the possibility of acting concretely and realizing their valuable ends.

The *unity* of universal and particular, that is, what Hegel calls “*individuality*” (*Einzelheit*) (*PhR*, § 7), is the true “engine” of the self-realization process of the free will. It is due to this unity that it can be both transversal towards particular subjects – meaning that it is not identifiable with the will of specific persons – and capable of actualizing itself in concrete practices, norms and institutions. The will, as a rational structure, is therefore to be understood as what, on the one hand, makes a society more than a mere aggregate of subjects or particular intentions, and namely a geographical unity endowed with history and certain shared values and ideals, possibly normatively codified and made

[9] This point has been emphasized especially by QUANTE, M., *Spirit's Actuality*. Paderborn: Mentis-Brill 2018.

operative by institutions; and, on the other hand, the will is what allows citizens to find themselves in this social unity, that is, to conceive of themselves as members who actively contribute to the common good, and therefore without renouncing their individual autonomy, but rather feeling it safeguarded and enhanced. Hegel writes that the will “posits itself as the negative of itself” and “at the same time remains with itself.” This conceptual framework is able to ensure both the supra-individuality of norms and institutions, and the ability of individuals to recognize themselves in them.¹⁰

III.2. SELF-REALIZATION AS INTERACTION

The theory of the free will thus allows for an understanding of how people can realize themselves in the social world. As already seen in the *Logic*, on a more general level, Hegel conceives of self-realization as a *dialectical process* or *interaction between the individual and social reality*.

Let me explain more explicitly what I mean by this.

When we talk about “self-realization” we obviously refer to the development of a subject’s “self.” But in the Hegelian conception, the self is not defined independently of or in spite of the world, but rather precisely *through* it. As has been pointed out by many interpreters,¹¹ the identity of an agent depends for Hegel on being recognized by other agents and on her recognition of them in turn. In this way the self is essentially *relational*, so that its realization implies the possibility of establishing successful relationships with other individuals, such as relationships of love, trust, solidarity, and so on. In the Hegelian framework, then, a person’s identity is defined by her actions within a social context – a context consisting of other people as well as shared practices, norms, and institutions. As a consequence, when this person realizes herself, she is not actualizing an inner potential defined apart from her external context, but she is interacting with her surrounding reality.

Self-realization, therefore, is first and foremost a process of *extroflexion* before introflexion (which is nonetheless necessary), that is, a commitment to *act* in order to create a rational, just reality, namely a reality in which a person can recognize herself and in which she can thereby feel “at home.” Hegel summarizes the basic structure of this conception as follows:

[10] For a more extensive look at Hegel’s theory of the free will and its consequences see MANCHISI, A., “The Right and the Good in Hegel’s Social and Political Philosophy”, in *Ethics & Politics* 23 (2), 2021, pp. 39-58.

[11] This point has been emphasized notoriously by HONNETH, A., *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Tr. by J. Anderson. Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press 1996; Id., *Suffering from Indeterminacy. An Attempt at a Reactualization of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. Tr. by J. BEN-LEVI. Assen: Van Gorcum, 2000.

The activity of the will consists in removing [*aufzuheben*] the contradiction between subjectivity and objectivity and in translating its ends from their subjective determination into an objective one, while at the same time remaining *with itself* in this objectivity. (*PhR*, § 28)

This quote nicely sums up what I have argued above. The structure of the will makes it an “activity” aimed at “removing the contradiction” between subjectivity and objectivity, that is, at “fluidifying” the dialectical interaction between the internal conditions of the subject and the external conditions of the social world. The aim of this activity is exactly that of “translating” subjective ends into objectivity, that is, of acting in such a way that individual realization can shape external reality and, in so doing, the individual can “remain *with itself*” in this reality, namely, can perceive it not as an external constraint, something “other,” but as something to which she intrinsically belongs.¹²

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The central aim of this study has been to clarify the “structural” features of Hegel’s account of self-realization. The main thesis I have tried to demonstrate is that Hegel conceives of self-realization not as the expression or actualization of an inner potential, but as the *rational interaction between a subject and her surrounding reality*.

Many consequences for the relationship between individual agency and the social world follow from this conception. In conclusion, let me emphasize those consequences that I consider philosophically most relevant.

First, Hegel shifts the focus from the interiority of persons to external reality. Many philosophers (but also psychologists, sociologists and economists) assume that a person can make the best of what she is only by turning to herself and taking care of herself; in Hegel’s account, on the contrary, individuals can fulfill themselves only by “stepping outside” the limits of their own interiority and actively participating in the social enterprise. For Hegel, in fact, self-realization is not a merely private activity, but a process that concerns the actions of individuals within society. By examining some key paragraphs of the Introduction to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, I have therefore tried to show how realizing oneself, in the Hegelian perspective, means to rationally exercise one’s particular will within the universal of society, that is, to intelli-

[12] I have developed this point within a systematic framework in MANCHISI, A., “Vita buona e interazione con l’ambiente”, in C. CHIURCO and M. DEODATI (eds.), *Etica e natura*. Napoli-Salerno: Orthotes, 2021, pp. 137-150; Id., “Recognition, Good Life, and Good World” in *Itinerari* 60, 2021, pp. 219-236.

gently and responsibly interact with other people, with their life plans and with the complex of norms and institutions that define their limits and possibilities.

Secondly, Hegel understands self-realization in terms of rational agency and commitment to the world. I have already emphasized this point several times, but I think it is important to stress it again. Simplifying a little, we could say that today two opposing conceptions of self-realization are predominant: a *quietistic* one and a *managerial* one. The first holds that an individual can only fulfill herself through meditation, transcendence of the body, abstraction from the world, and so on. The other uses a business rhetoric, arguing that self-realization comes from fully satisfying one's ambitions and imposing one's will on the world. Hegel's philosophy allows us to see both of these conceptions as flawed, since they both presuppose a separation between the self and reality while attempting to fill such a separation, in one case by annihilating the self, and on the other by subjugating the world. For Hegel, on the contrary, society is not to be understood as something "external" to the individual, but as an essential component of her identity. As a consequence, self-realization requires neither a distancing from nor a subjection to a social context, but a rational and active interaction with it.

In my view, both points I have raised in these concluding remarks are well summarized by Hegel's choice to speak, in the *Philosophy of Right*, not of the "good life," as in traditional ethics, but of the *living good*. Consider the well-known § 142:

Ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*] is the *Idea of freedom* as the living good [*das lebendige Gute*] which has its knowledge and volition in self-consciousness, and its actuality through self-conscious action. Similarly, it is in ethical being that self-consciousness has its motivating end and a foundation which has being in and for itself. Ethical life is accordingly *the concept of freedom which has become the existing world and the nature of self-consciousness*.

With regard to the problem of self-realization, this paragraph condenses both the shift of emphasis from the interiority of the subject to external reality and the crucial role of engagement with the world. For Hegel, in fact, "*freedom*" is neither a private possession of the individual nor an abstract ideal that must be actualized. Rather, it consists in "self-conscious action," that is, in the capacity of the subject to exercise her "knowledge and volition," and thereby make the "good" a concrete, "living" reality. In this conception, individual freedom requires a free society; human flourishing requires the flourishing of the surrounding world. And this means that a person can make the best of what she is only if she makes the "*existing world*" better, that is, only if she is

committed to creating a more just and rational society, a society that ensures the freedom and realization of each and all.

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