

Communication Technology and the World Spirit

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0327

The Asian Conference on Ethics, Religion & Philosophy 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013



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The principal aim here is to indicate how Hegel's notion of 'spirit' can shed light on the current-day phenomenon of the increasing interconnectedness of the world enabled by the development of communication technology. This may initially seem odd to some, not only because of the juxtaposition of the words 'technology' and 'spirit', but also because even Hegel's contemporary advocates, even those to whom certain details in Hegel's writings furnish valid insights into issues that affect modern society, shy away from the notion of 'spirit' and the idea of history as the progressive realization of the 'world spirit', regarding both as antiquated historical curiosities. It is to be argued here that Hegel's conception of the activity of the 'world spirit' in history is by no means as outlandish as it may sound to modern ears and that it can in fact provide a useful means of comprehending some of the effects of the increasing communicational connectedness of global society. In order to do this it is necessary to explore the meaning of the term 'spirit' in Hegel's work, not only with a view to demystifying the concept, but also with the purpose of demonstrating its intrinsic relation to universality, sociality, and the public sphere of intersubjective communication. It is then necessary to show how the notion of 'spirit' may contribute towards an understanding of the collective awareness that communication technologies can help bring about.

Worldly Spirit

A common misapprehension of the Hegelian concept of 'spirit' is that it refers to an otherworldly force that manifests itself in human society and history. The caricature is that the 'world spirit' is some kind of divine pantheistic essence of the universe that realizes itself through human historical development. Charles Taylor is an example of a contemporary Hegel scholar who adheres to this line of interpretation, claiming that for Hegel 'spirit' is a 'cosmic spirit' which expressively manifests itself through the vehicle of human individuals and cultures (Taylor 1979: 11). Taylor finds this aspect of Hegel's philosophy impossible to accept for the modern mind, but he finds much to admire in Hegel's social and political philosophy. While the term 'cosmic spirit' is a term invented by Taylor that is absent from Hegel's writings, there is plenty of textual evidence that appears to suggest that Hegel did indeed mean something divine by his use of the term 'spirit'. Hegel refers to the historical development of the 'world spirit' as the plan of providence and as a theodicy, an ultimate vindication of God's goodness in the face of all the evil in the world (Hegel 2001: 26-29). In the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel writes that nations and individuals 'the unconscious tools and organs of the world-spirit' (Hegel 1996: 343).

However, despite the use of animistic metaphor and theological allusion, such statements do not necessarily mean that the 'world spirit' is a conscious being whose deliberate plan is realized in the development of human cultural formations. There is nothing otherworldly about what the word 'spirit' refers to in Hegel's system. 'Spirit' names the level of consciousness that depends on social interaction and that goes beyond immediate sense-awareness, making possible the conception of things in terms of universal concepts. The German word that Hegel uses, *Geist*, can be rendered into English as either 'spirit' or 'mind'. Hegel's earlier translators preferred the latter and his more recent ones the former. The word 'mind' has the advantage of implying something commonplace rather than mystical, but it has the disadvantage of implying an individual person's consciousness. The word 'spirit' has the disadvantage of

implying something otherworldly and mystical, but it has the advantage of being used to refer to collective forms of consciousness, as in phrases like ‘team spirit’, ‘spirit of the age’, or ‘spirit of the nation’. For Hegel, ‘spirit’ is a social or collective awareness that does not exist independently of the individual minds that take part in it. Spirit emerges out of human interaction.

This can be seen most clearly in the section of Hegel’s book the *Phenomenology of Spirit* where consciousness in its progressive development accedes to what is called ‘the spiritual daylight of the present’ after it sees itself through the eyes of the other, a condition of mutual recognition (Hegel 1977: 110-111). The ability to transcend one’s immediate individuality, to conceive of oneself from the outside and thus to be genuinely self-conscious, is made possible by encountering the other person. With such mutual recognition individuals come to regard themselves and others as free self-conscious persons with their own independence and intrinsic worth. It is at this point in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that Hegel provides a definition of the term ‘spirit’ in the following way: ‘Spirit is... this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: “I” that is “We” and “We” that is “I”’ (Hegel 1977: 110). Spirit is then a community of free beings who mutually recognize each other’s freedom and independence.

Spirit as the unity in diversity of a community of free beings is not then merely a set of shared ideas. It is not just a collective something, or ‘substance’ as Hegel would call it; it is also conscious life-activity, or ‘subject’ as Hegel would call it, a free self-determining activity that negates the mere givenness of positive substance. Spirit as subject is a self-positing determinability which negates and transcends naturalistic substance, which is able to resist the determinations imposed by natural causality. As the free negative activity of substance that is also subject, spirit has a will. Spirit’s will is a ‘universal will’ which, like Rousseau’s ‘general will’, is not the aggregate of the selfish wills of all the individuals who are included in the collective in question. Nor is it a will that is conjured up above and beyond these individuals; it is rather a will for the common good that resides in each individual.

As spirit is substance transforming itself into subject, the in-itself into the for-itself, it is not just information, but also communication, not just the public availability of information and ideas, but also intersubjective communicative activity. Spirit emerges out of intersubjective communication, which, when genuine, is itself founded on relations of mutual recognition, the mutual recognition of each participant as a free and independent rational being. Such communication is based on the assumption that viewpoints need to be justifiable to other people, to other free rational beings (Hegel 1996: xvii).

Universal Self-consciousness

For Hegel, what arises out of the intersubjective relations of mutual recognition is what he calls a ‘universal self-consciousness’ (Hegel 1971: 176). The self becomes self-conscious through being acknowledged by the other, an act of becoming self-conscious which itself in turn involves acknowledging the other as an independent self-consciousness. However, Hegel does not stop at a theory of the interdependence

of self-consciousnesses, of the role of intersubjectivity in the formation of self-conscious identities; he seeks to comprehend what this mutual dependence of independent beings actually entails. A new conception then arises in which what is collectively acknowledged is effectively the humanity of each individual person. While Hegel prefers to use the word 'spirit' rather than 'humanity', it is clear that he regards what is here being recognized in the other as the genus [*Gattung*] of all rational self-conscious beings. This universal self-consciousness of a shared humanity is spirit becoming aware of itself as spirit. The awakening of the lived universality of the generic-being of spirit, of spirit *as* spirit, lifts the stranglehold of the immediacy of egoistic need, making it possible to see the intrinsic value of *each* person.

The notion of spirit as concrete universality, as the manifestation of universality in and through the individual, is what lies behind another of Hegel's attempts at defining spirit. In the *Philosophy of Right* he writes: 'The individuals of a multitude are spiritual beings, and have a twofold character. In them is the extreme of the independently conscious and willing individuality, and also the extreme of the universality, which knows and wills what is substantive' (Hegel 1996: 253). When these two aspects of the life of spirit are abstracted and made external to each other a condition of alienation occurs and spirit is divided from itself, leaving universality as a lifeless abstraction opposed to an individual trapped in a state of wretched immediacy.

Two of the so-called Young Hegelians, Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx, apply Hegel's insight here to the philosophy of religion and social theory respectively. Feuerbach directly refers to the 'twofold life' of the human, a finite individual with an essentially unrestricted universal mental existence (Feuerbach 1855: 20). The finite embodied individual is alienated from her own generic-being when this lived universality is misrecognized as belonging to a projected external theological entity. The Christian God is then conceived by Feuerbach as a projected representation of human conscious universality in the form of an otherworldly being separated from actually living human individuals. The unlimited lived universality of 'human nature' is alienated from individual human beings by being attributed to an imaginary theological being who is external to all humans. Feuerbach advocates a 'humanist' overcoming of this religious alienation in the form of a re-internalization of infinite generic-being into the life of individual human beings.

For Marx, it is capitalist social relations and the division of labour that alienate the worker from her universal 'generic-being', her *Gattungswesen* (Marx 1977: 67-69). Under such conditions the limitless creative capacity of a human as a 'generic-being' is not manifested in the free productive activity of the individual person, but is reduced for that person to a narrow repetitive activity that is experienced as a mere means to subsistence. The worker does not see herself in her own activity or in the product of that activity. The ultimate product of the labour of the workers as a class is capital as a whole, which presents itself to individual workers as something hostile and alien rather than as the product of their own labour. Capital in the form of money is described by Marx as 'the alienated *ability of mankind*' (Marx 1977: 123), a limitless creative capacity represented as something external to each human being, but which in reality has its source in the limitless 'generic-being' of so-called 'human nature'. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx differs from Hegel when he argues that the modern emergence of 'universally developed individuals' (Marx 1993: 162), of people not

restricted to one role or function, is not simply an intra-spiritual development, but a product of historical developments in the mode of production at the economic base of society. This universality is made possible by capitalist 'production on the basis of exchange values', production for a market system, a system which enables people to transcend limitations such as feudal bonds, but which at the same time alienates this universality from the life of each person. Universality is realized at the external abstract societal level – in the form of money, exchange value, the sociality of production, and the division of labour – but is alienated from the individual worker. The overcoming of such alienation would involve a transformation of the social relations of production in a way that would internalize the limitless creative activity of generic-being into the lives of each individual.

Marx's notion of the human as a generic-being is a reprise of Hegel's notion of spirit. For Marx as for Hegel, the universality of consciousness, the ability to think conceptually, is a product of the sociality of humans. Marx writes that the rational universality of consciousness is 'the *theoretical* shape of... the *real* community, the social fabric' (Marx 1977: 92).

Public Spirit

Spirit is the universal self-consciousness of the intersubjective life of a community or society. While the Hegelian notion of spirit appears in many ways to be a socially concrete elaboration of Kant's merely formal and abstract conception of rational universality, spirit is implicitly present in Kant's writings in the notion of 'publicness' or 'publicity [*Publicität*]'. The critical use of reason requires a public sphere of debate and argument, free from the coercive demands of mere authority (Kant 1991: 125-130). What Kant calls the 'private' realm is the realm in which individuals obey authority without question, whereas what he calls the 'public' realm, provided that it is genuinely a realm of the exchange of ideas among free-thinking people, is the arena in which reason is employed. Something is rational if it can be justified to other rational people in a non-coercive public space. Someone can freely employ the faculty of critical reason and offer justifications for his arguments if he 'considers himself as a member of a complete commonwealth or even of a cosmopolitan society, and thence as a man of learning who may address a public in the truest sense of the word' (Kant 1991: 56). Kant's notion of a 'public will' for the common good is similar to Rousseau's 'general will', but unlike the latter it can only be realized through the public use of reason (Kant 1991: 77). Of course, Kant's concept of 'publicness' assumes as a precondition a community of well-informed and educated 'rational beings', unconstrained by inequalities of access and opportunity, so it should be seen as an ideal to be worked towards rather than as a given reality.

Interest in the Kantian notion of the public sphere has been reawakened by the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas. He regards the public sphere [*Öffentlichkeit*] as a space in which the participants are assumed to be equals, irrespective of their pre-existing social positions. He claims that such a sphere emerged in eighteenth-century Europe, during the age of the Enlightenment, through the mass publication of newspapers, pamphlets, and books, as well as through the setting up of literary salons and debating societies (Habermas 1989: 36). Such a realm encourages the putting forward of evidence-based arguments for the public good rather than for private

interests. Habermas laments the later decline of the public sphere in which the mass media reduces the public to passive consumers rather than participants engaged in deliberative interaction (Habermas 1989: 159-180). As a result of this decline, what presents itself as collective decision making amounts to nothing more than a compromise of conflicting private interests rather than an agreement arrived at by rational beings engaged in discussion about the common good. Out of his interest in the notion of the public sphere Habermas develops a theory of intersubjective communicative rationality, which he claims at one point 'can reconstruct Hegel's concept of the ethical context of life' (Habermas 1987: 316). This is another way of saying that the Habermasian theory of communicative action is an attempt at modernizing the Hegelian concept of 'spirit'.

The public sphere is a Weberian 'ideal-type', a 'category' of bourgeois capitalist society whose actual existence does not live up to its idea. Habermas notes that Marx submits this 'category' to a withering ideology-critique. He writes: 'The public sphere with which Marx saw himself confronted contradicted its own principle of universal accessibility' (Habermas 1989: 124). A pseudo public sphere emerges that serves to mask the anti-universalist particularism of class society.

For Marx, under certain socio-economic conditions the public sphere is the sphere of what he calls 'ideology'. Ideology is here a conception of social consciousness both as being conditioned by the particular system of production at the base of the society in question and as masking that system with a false universality. It is thus an illusory form of consciousness that presents a false image of harmony and unity in society, hiding the reality of class division and conflict. In this way it functions to maintain and reproduce the existing system of social relations by serving the particularist interests of the ruling class, interests which it presents as universal. Marx writes: 'The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it' (Marx 1970: 64). The public sphere under capitalism is a bourgeois public sphere pretending to be a universal one. This public sphere does not live up to its idea, because society is divided from itself at the level of the relations of production.

The Aim of World History

A genuine public sphere could only emerge if there were historical changes that somehow reintegrated the abstract generality of ideas with the lived experience of individuals, a concrete universality that would establish a level playing field for each person in terms of opportunities for social participation and communication. In his article 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', Kant suggests that a philosophical approach to history, one which aims to make of history something intelligible, should involve an interpretation of events in terms of how they ultimately further the formation of an integrated and harmonious global realm of rational world citizens (Kant 1991: 51). This prefigures Hegel's later formulation of history as the progressive realization of the 'world spirit'. Such a formulation refers to the patterns discernible in philosophically comprehended past history and does not imply that progress is inevitable in the actual events of empirical history. The latter can move forwards or backwards without any guarantee, but the term 'forwards' here implies

that history has an aim, a *telos*, which renders it comprehensible. In discussing this aim, Hegel, in his *Philosophy of World History*, offers yet another definition of spirit. He writes: 'As the essence of Matter is Gravity, so, on the other hand, we may affirm that the substance, the essence of Spirit is Freedom' (Hegel 2001: 31). It should be noted that this is 'freedom' in the Kantian sense of self-conscious rational universality which constitutes a will free from naturalistic impulses and external authority. Hegel goes on to summarize his philosophy of world history in the following sentence: 'The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom' (Hegel 2001: 33). For Hegel, implicit in the idea of world history is the aim of the realization of the idea of spirit. This is because without the mental transcendence of nature there would be no history. The process of history tends ultimately towards the universal self-consciousness of the world spirit as the world spirit. This is spirit's coming to consciousness of itself, of its own freedom. Hegel sees the modern world as the awakening of reason in history.

Notoriously, Hegel claims that the freedom that is the ultimate aim of history was realized in his own time in the form of Napoleon's conquest of Prussia. Hegel saw Napoleon on the streets of Jena after the decisive battle there, and proclaimed in a letter to his friend that he had seen the 'world soul [*Weltseele*]' on horseback. Hegel saw the world spirit as being manifested in the actions of historically significant individuals, despite those individuals being unaware of this. The substantive freedom that is for Hegel the culmination of the historical process is realized in the combination of the individual inner freedom of the protestant 'priesthood of all believers' with the outward civic freedom in which each citizen is recognized legally as free (Hegel 2001: 473-477). This combination supposedly characterized the Prussia of Hegel's time, because civic freedom was brought to protestant Prussia by Napoleon's reforms which abolished the last vestiges of feudalism and brought equal rights to all. The principles of the French revolution that Napoleon was applying could not bring the substantive freedom of spirit to France itself on the grounds that Catholic France had not had a religious reformation emphasizing inner conviction rather than outward observance.

The Spirit of Social Media

Whatever one may think of Hegel's attempt at giving a particular empirical example of the world spirit becoming conscious of itself, a drive towards universal self-consciousness can certainly be discerned in some of the historical events of today. While, as we have seen, the Habermas of the late twentieth-century describes how the mass media works towards the closure of the public sphere, the question now arises as to whether the spread of communication technologies such as the internet might cut through this closure and reignite the public spirit. Much has been said about how the enhancement of both social awareness and interactive communication enabled by social media may have played a role in certain protest movements and revolutions in recent years. For example, collective outrage at general corruption and specific acts of injustice played a major role in the upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011, a response made possible by the accessibility of the relevant information and by the connectedness of significant swathes of the population.

The internet theorist Clay Shirky plays down the significance of social media in such events and their potential for influencing immediate political change. Instead, he claims that 'the more promising way to think about social media is as long-term tools that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere' (Shirky 2011). In Hegelian terms, social media, as the tools through which spirit can become conscious of itself as spirit, can more effectively serve to enact a gradual change in the inner conviction of people rather than to enact a sudden regime change that is merely external to each person. Shirky describes how social media can further the development of social consciousness. He defines this 'shared awareness' as 'the ability of each member of a group to not only understand the situation at hand, but also understand that everyone else does too' (Shirky 2011). Shirky points out that the public sphere cannot flourish just under conditions of abstract political freedom, but also requires a society that is educated and connected enough to be able to engage in rational discussion of the issues at hand. This insight that the achievement of freedom depends on the emergence of the social conditions of its possibility, that it is not enough to posit abstract principles, is an argument that Hegel at times wields against Kant. However, Shirky is silent on the socio-economic conditions that would be necessary for a viable public sphere.

Despite this, he is not so naïve as to regard social media as having a necessarily positive political effect. He writes: 'Social media produce as much harm to democratization as good, because repressive governments are becoming better at using these tools to suppress dissent' (Shirky 2011). As has been discussed, Marx claims that the class who control the means of 'material production' also control the means of 'mental production'. The question of the role that communication technology can play in the development of a genuine public sphere and in the progress of the self-consciousness of the world spirit is principally the question of the extent to which the use of this technology can exceed such control.

One of Shirky's books about the impact of social media is titled *Here Comes Everybody*, which is named after the main 'character' in James Joyce's 'novel' *Finnegans Wake*. If changed from a Joycean to a Hegelian idiom the book could have been called 'The World Spirit Coming to Consciousness of Itself'.

The Hegelian notion of spirit is not a relic of an outdated and irrelevant philosophical system, but refers to phenomena – such as universal self-consciousness, sociality, mutual recognition, and the public sphere – which are more topical now than ever before. It seems at least more reasonable to attribute the notion of the emergence of the self-consciousness of the world spirit to the social impact of today's proliferation of communication technology than to Napoleon's invasion of Prussia. Far from being something otherworldly, 'spirit' refers to the world of social relations and intersubjective communication which develops through history. The awareness from within of this world as a whole, the self-awareness of spirit as spirit, produces the universal self-consciousness, freed from the bonds of givenness, of a free, self-determining rational being. Alienation occurs under social conditions in which universality is separated from the life of the individual. Spirit is realized in a public sphere of uncoerced communicative interaction between people. In a capitalist society founded on class division an alienated pseudo public sphere emerges through which ideas serving particular interests are presented as universal. The aim of history is the de-alienation of spirit. The spread in the use of communication technology and the

social media can causally contribute to this aim, provided that this spread enables the emergence of a public sphere that transcends the dominance over the means of mental production by the particular interests of the owners of the means of material production.

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