

## Ordinary Freedom: Hegel on the Ethical Basis of Modern Skepticism

How is modern skepticism related to modern conceptions of freedom? Is it a coincidence that, at the same time when Descartes and Hume doubt the very possibility of knowledge, Hobbes and Locke proceed from the notion of a self-sufficient individual? Drawing on Hegel's theory of Ethical Life [*Sittlichkeit*], I argue that the rise of modern civil society—the sphere of the market economy—is coupled with an impoverished conception of individual freedom, which informs key features of modern philosophy in general and modern skepticism in particular. Hence the remedy for skepticism is not primarily theoretical but ethical; it lies in balancing the skeptical and even nihilistic effects of civil society with habits and ways of thinking that are cultivated within other spheres of *Sittlichkeit*, with special attention given to the role of the nuclear family.

Reading Hegel's oft-neglected account of human development in his *Anthropology*, Chapter I elaborates a normative account of human cognition. Hegel holds that knowledge is not a purely receptive capacity but mediated by a subjective commitment to the conceptual norms—both epistemic and practical—of our community. He explains the fact that we nonetheless tend to represent knowledge as receptive—especially in modernity—in terms of a subjective striving to independence from the community. By representing the *world* as obtaining independently of us, we can represent *ourselves* as independent of communal norms.

Western modernity is marked by an unprecedented commitment to individual independence. Chapter II explains this by explicating Hegel's notion of personal freedom, namely, the idea that individuals are normatively self-sufficient. Although a person follows social norms, they are represented as limitations on her freedom, rather than expressing her essential nature (by contrast, say, to a citizen of the ancient polis). Personal freedom, which emerges in Roman law but gains particular prevalence in modern civil society, is inseparable from a key presupposition (and mistake) of modern metaphysics: that the object obtains independently of the subject's practical commitments.

Hegel holds that that this conception of the object as radically separate from the subject's practical concerns leads to a fusion of metaphysical skepticism and scientific dogmatism, deemed “modern skepticism”. Recent commentators, stressing Hegel's dismissal of modern skepticism, have ignored the ethical basis of this mistaken fusion, which helps explain why Hegel maintained an ongoing engagement with it. In Chapter III, I argue that modern skepticism expresses an impoverished conception of individual freedom—one that denies the individual's dependence on the community and gives rise to various forms of nihilism.

Chapter IV argues that since modern skepticism is rooted in a conception of freedom sustained within modern civil society, a remedy to skepticism must be primarily ethical. I focus on the role the nuclear family has, for Hegel, in fostering an alternative conception of freedom, according to which collective norms do not limit individual freedom but express it, and, accordingly, knowledge is mediated by how *others* represent shared experiences. Drawing on later thinkers, predominantly Marx, I doubt the ability of the familial sphere to counter the pervading impact of the market economy on the self-conception of individuals.