“Death Must Have Become Terrifying”: The Social Conditions of Anxiety

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Abstract

Hegel’s account of the social conditions of anxiety. While my focus is the modern period, I use Hegel’s comments on death in previous epochs—especially in ancient Greece—to bring out the peculiarity of modernity. In the first half of the paper, I discuss the nature and conditions of anxiety. In the second half, I trace Hegel’s critique of a common way to avoid—or flee from—anxiety in modernity, which results in social isolation, boredom, and emptiness. As long as the modern individual is only an economic actor in civil society, she is prone to anxiety. To confront her finitude, Hegel argues, she must endorse her political affiliation, namely, be an active and sacrificing citizen of the state.

Keywords: death; anxiety; Hegel; recognition; finitude.

Introduction

In an early essay commenting on the decline of the Greek polis and the Roman Republic, Hegel makes a curious statement. For the individual of the time, he says, "death, the phenomenon that demolished the whole web of his purposes and the activity of his entire life, must have become something terrifying" (1: 206; ETW 157).[1] That death is terrifying might strike us as obvious enough, a fundamental existential condition as Heidegger and like-minded thinkers would later this. Hegel, however, maintains that the significance of death is *historically and culturally evolving*. The termination of human life had a different meaning in various ethical contexts, from ancient China and India, through the Greek Golden Age and the Roman Empire, and to modernity.[2] The significance of death is historically evolving because it is *socially mediated*, namely, shaped by the social institutions and forms of recognition in which individuals partake.

This paper offers a reconstruction of Hegel's account of the social conditions of anxiety. While my focus is the modern period, I will use Hegel's comments on death in previous epochs—especially in ancient Greece—to bring out the peculiarity of modernity in this respect. In the first half of the paper (section 1), I discuss the nature and conditions of anxiety. In the second half (section 2), I trace Hegel's critique of a common way to avoid—or *flee* from—anxiety in modernity. Finally, the conclusion would indicate the relevance of this social account of anxiety for understanding the state's role in helping its citizens cope with their finitude.

Hegel's historicization of anxiety anticipated the work of French historian Phillipe Ariès, who later argued that only in the 18th century did people begin to fear death in its proper modern significance.[3] While human beings have always been concerned with their demise, they produced cultural systems that "tamed" it, providing them with ways to think of death not as an end but as yet another station, a transition to a different mode of existence. Through rituals of mourning and commemoration, the dead would secure a lasting presence in the lives of families and communities, a projected mode of being that would offer them, when still alive, a consoling horizon of immortality. However, once life becomes centered on individual

accomplishment, death comes to be signified as utter extinction, the absolute negation of the individual—and, as such, terrifying.

In this respect, Hegel’s account of human mortality systematically articulates still-implicit trends of his epoch—in line with his well-known dictum that philosophy is “its own time comprehended in thought” (PhR, Preface). According to Alexandre Kojève, Hegelian philosophy centers on "the necessary condition of Man's existence—the condition of death, of finiteness."[4] This idea, common among Hegel's mid-century French commentators, has been thoroughly neglected by the academic philosophical literature of the past few decades. [5] The paper seeks to fill this lacuna and indicate Hegel's relevance for existential and phenomenological thought.

1. The Social Conditions of Anxiety

In reconstructing Hegel’s account of the modern significance of death, we can begin with three observations. First, Hegel identifies a specific conception of freedom with modernity and attributes it to the Protestant Reformation, namely, "moral subjectivity." Second, a vital element of this conception of freedom is "the principle of self-standing particularity” (PhR §185R), that is, the idea that the (particular) subject is free insofar as she herself determines her properties or determinations. Third, this conception has direct implications on how a free subject represents her natural side, what Hegel calls “bodiliness” [*Körperlichkeit*, E3 §412], including the event that is doomed to terminate her bodiliness, namely, death.

To get a better sense of these observations, we can look at how they are all registered in Hegel’s interpretation of the biblical story of the Garden of Eden—much as in a similar interpretation advanced by the philosopher Hegel most identifies with "moral subjectivity," namely, Immanuel Kant. They know themselves as spiritual or rational once Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge. As such, they strive for self-determination, to be the authors of their properties. Alas, this makes them experience a contradiction with their bodiliness since, *qua* embodied, they are *externally* determined. I am born, age, or taken by sexual desire regardless of my rational volition. The rational subject, then, strives for self-determination but thereby represents a split with her naturalness. Hegel and Kant claim that the result is the first

instance of shame (E1 §24Z3; Kant 8: 112-13; *Anthropology, History, and Education* 166).[6]

In his Anthropology, Hegel defines shame as a rage against oneself, arising from a "contradiction between my appearance and what I should and will to be" (E3 §401Z). Shame is premised on a gap between a desired self-determined status ("what I should and will to be") and the subject's failure to conform. So conceived, shame is obviously not an exclusively Christian phenomenon. Human beings aspire to statuses in various contexts and often appear to fail, thereby feeling shame. What is distinctive, however, is that the biblical myth makes our bodily side *as such*—over and beyond *specific* statuses or failures (to be a proper soldier, wife, politician)—shameful. Our very (bodily) *existence* becomes the basis of shame.

Now, shame depends on the presence of another subject—to whom my failure is observable. Grammatically, if I feel shame, it is partly because I believe that other subjects *loathe* me (or *would* loathe me if they saw my shameful feature). Strikingly, Hegel suggests that in the aftermath of the ancient polis, with the rise of Christianity, shame is internalized, resulting in *self-loathing*. In the early theological writings, he claims that the Christian subject "loathes himself" [*verachtet sich*; 1:245; ETW 303] and describes a society whose members are inflicted by "the loathing [*Verachtung*] of others and their own self-feeling of disgrace [*Schande*]" (1:213; ETW 165)—disgrace, that is, for their very (bodily, worldly) existence. Even much later, in the *Philosophy of Right*, we find "something loathsome [*Verächtliches*]" about being a person.[7] If we bear in mind the basis for Christian shame—our bodily existence—it is hardly surprising that it becomes self-loathing. Since shame is no longer about a *specific* appearance that contradicts "what I should and will to be" but my appearance as such, the very fact I appear (in being embodied), then my disgrace becomes essential, as it were.

This characterization of shame may seem overly general, losing sight of specific cases. After all, even in the Garden of Eden, it seems there are specific appearances that generate the shame—the genitals—and shame subsides once the famous figleaf is employed. In response, I would like to make a point that concerns not only shame but also my discussion of other affects in this paper, especially anxiety. We should distinguish between an affective *disposition* and specific affective *instances*. Concerning all affects discussed, I articulate why the

modern subject is *disposed* to them. It is not to say that she always concretely feels the corresponding affect, namely, that the disposition is *actualized*. To Hegel, the Christian subject is disposed to shame or self-loathing, even if it is not always triggered. She is constitutive—in virtue of her conception of freedom—prone to shame.[8] Similarly, I soon argue she is *disposed* to anxiety, even if she simultaneously employs means to avoid it.

Next, Hegel’s reference to the “person” in invoking shame, disgrace, or self-loathing could suggest that the problem of shame applies less, if at all, to the members of *modern* civil society. In Hegel’s mature social philosophy, “personality” [*Persönlichkeit*] denotes a conception of freedom that is distinct from—and historically prior to—“moral subjectivity.” The former becomes central in the Roman Empire and the advent of medieval Catholicism and spells shame concerning worldly activities, specifically economic practice or *labor*. Such activities reflect that we are bodily creatures who, resulting from the Original Sin, must earn bread "in the sweat of our brows." However, with the rise of the Protestant religion, a new conception of freedom emerged. In terms of moral subjectivity, worldly economic activity becomes *honorable*. Hegel's interpretation of the story of Eden incorporates this protestant impulse in stressing the role of labor not in *showing* our shame but in *reducing* it. Compare the labor of the enslaved person in ancient Rome with that of the modern laborer. The former exhibited, by laboring, the constitutive disgrace of the human as a creature who must sweat to exist. The modern worker performs, at least ideally, his power to modify the conditions of his existence. According to Hegel's protestant construal, human beings labor on nature to accommodate rational purposes more, thereby reducing the gap between their spiritual and natural sides. Such an effort invokes honor. Accordingly, the modern individual, Hegel says,

> by a process of self-determination, makes himself a member of one of the moments of civil society through his activity, diligence, and skill, and supports himself in this capacity; and only through this mediation with the universal does he […] gain recognition in his own eyes and the eyes of others. (PhR §207)

Nevertheless, that *some* of his bodily activity—namely, labor or economic pursuits—becomes honorable does not remove the specter

of shame from the subject's naturalness. The subject earns honor for his *assertive activity*—in general, for his success in making his practice accord with the ideal of rational self-determination, particularly his professional pursuits, and accomplishments. To succeed in such pursuits, life in civil society is accompanied by a constant "struggle with the external world and with himself" (PhR §166). As part of this struggle, I suggest the subject must hide, suppress, and even repress features less in line with this successful and assertive face. Such features compose his vulnerable and needy side, aspects of his subjectivity that fall short of self-determination and desired professional statuses. Under this grouping fall needs or desires that may interfere with professional life, such as sexual desire (which could make the subject vulnerable to others), and mainly features like disease and aging. Therefore, much as the normative ideal of moral subjectivity relieves *some* aspects of our bodiliness from the burden of shame, there is a sense in which it makes *other* aspects all the *more* shameful.[9]

Having this account of the axis between shame and bodiliness in place, we can finally articulate Hegel's reasons for the affective disposition at the center of my discussion, namely, anxiety. The first reason follows from the claim that some determinations—those representing the subject's constitutive weakness, his being the object of external determination—remain shameful. From this perspective, death appears as the ultimate triumph of nature—the ultimate *external* determination—on the self-determined subject! Death is "the immediate natural materialization, not the act of a self-consciousness" (PhG 295; ¶452). Therefore, when the subject thinks of her looming end, she is reminded that however she tries, never mind how much worldly success she has, she remains a natural creature, powerless in the face of natural destiny. The first reason death is terrifying is that it reminds the subject of her constitutive shame.

However, not only the fact that the subject is bound to fail (by being ultimately "defeated" by nature) informs anxiety, but also the fact that she is somewhat successful. After all, and in contrast to the Roman and medieval person, the modern subject *values* her worldly life, taking it to be her own work and creation. Because she now attributes such value to her life, it is all the more challenging to confront its necessary ending. This idea comes up in Hegel's analysis of the representation of death in romantic art, the aesthetic form that

reflects the kind of freedom conceived by the Protestant Reformation. "[M]an fears only for what is of great value for him. Nevertheless, life has this infinite value for self-consciousness only if the subject as spiritual and self-conscious is the only actuality, and now in a justified fear must image himself as negated by death” (LFA 523).

Both these reasons for the terror of death—that it is a reminder of the subject's ultimate failure and that it destroys her (however partial or temporary) worldly success—figure in Hegel’s interpretation of another biblical scene, the Exodus from Egypt:

> Those prevented by death in the wilderness from reaching the Promised Land had not fulfilled their destiny, the idea of their existence. Their life was subordinated to an end; it was not self-subsistent or self-sufficient, and their death, therefore, could only be regarded as evil (1: 287; ETW 195)

Like the modern members of civil society, the Israelites in the desert live on a journey toward attaining self-determination. However, they die before attaining this ideal; therefore, death is represented as "evil." Moreover, as a sensitive reader of the Biblical text, Hegel knows that it was not a coincidence that the desert generation did not make it to the Promised Land. Their past as enslaved people made them *unfit* to live in freedom; they *had to* die. Hence, their death does not only signify the end of their effort; there is a sense in which it shows they have always been doomed to fail. By analogy, the modern member of civil society represents death as destroying what she has done *and* as that which shows she could not have done more.

The third reason death is terrifying concerns the level of identification (or lack thereof) that a member of modern civil society has with her community. When Hegel claims that death "must have become terrifying," he immediately contrasts with a citizen of an ancient republic, for whom death was *not* terrifying. The reason for this, Hegel says, is that the ancient citizen identified the republic with his very soul so that “before him hovered the thought that his soul is eternal.” Since the Greeks identified with the community, and the community was to persist after his end, there was a sense that he was immortal. The question arises, in what sense precisely the Greek—unlike the modern subject—identified with his community to the extent that its alleged immortality comforted him for his own finitude.

The answer lies in the dominant form of recognition that Hegel attributes to the Greek polis, namely, civic love.[10] While it is not the romantic, sexual love that Hegel associates with modern marriage, it shares with it, I suggest, at least one feature that directly affects one's experience of death. To be in a love relationship with others is to share "the totality of individual experience" (PhR §163). This has two death-related functions. First, as I experience myself as a co-creator of a shared enterprise, I can comfort myself for my individual finitude with the thought of the persistence of this experience *for others*. Others would *remember* me through my co-creation. Second, the constant desirous and affective engagement with others makes me less inclined to vexing reflection on my finitude. Both these functions figure in Hegel's elaborate discussion of the Greek way of life in the Lectures on the Philosophy of History (12: 271-335), e.g., in the idea that the polity is a "work of art" (12: 306) to which citizens continuously contribute. Even their most individual actions are "strongly excited" performances for each other (1: 296)—in which they marvel and from which they take examples, thereby affirming, celebrating, and ultimately commemorating each other's lives.

Consider, by contrast, the death-related implications of the form of recognition that Hegel identifies with modern civil society, namely, honor. First, while love encourages shared or *co*-creation, honor is very much tied to one's *personal* achievements. Much as the individual is proud of her achievements, they are typically *lasting* because they would have substantial significance for those surviving her. Second, love is unconditionally affirming in that the loved individual—even if she fares poorly for a while—feels that she enjoys an unyielding favor in the other's eyes. Love is also immediate because this favor genuinely expresses the lover's feelings. Honor, by contrast, is conditioned and mediated—conditioned on conforming to professional standards and how I fare *compare*d to others and mediated by institutions that define these standards. Hence, as a modern academic, for example, I can easily be thrown into confidence and doubt concerning my standing—especially after I pass away. "Maybe I'm doing okay for now," I tell myself, "but what if Stephanie publishes a book about the same topic, and my contribution is all forgotten? And okay, I got tenure [reflecting a norm of success defined by an institution], but what do people *really* think about me?" Finally, life in civil society is premised on a separation between the

public and the private spheres. In *public*—as an active actor in the economic market—I am invested in my activity in concert with others. In *private*, I am left alone with my introspection, prone to attend to troubling facts such as vulnerability or death. The third reason death in modernity is terrifying is that I lack the kind of all-encompassing identification with a shared experience that will survive after me. My experience is *isolated*, so I am prone to anxious questions about my present and postmortem significance for others.[11]

In sum, the bourgeois subject (a typical member of modern civil society) is inflicted by a conflictual relationship with her own finitude. Given her commitment to self-determination, death—as the ultimate proof that she is externally determined—appears terrifying. Death does not only signify the individual’s failure to attain utter self-determination; it also terminates the achievements that she did have as a self-determined actor in civil society. Finally, given her fundamental isolation from the social whole, the latter's persistence is unlikely to comfort her.

I want to call the disposition to anxiety an *existential* condition. It is “existential” in the sense that (1) it is essential to human beings in general in virtue of being conscious creatures who also *exist* in a body; (2) it is a condition that a subject must contend or respond to—rather than a biological or physiological property that shapes human life from behind the back of the subject, as it were; and (3) this response could take the form of *fleeing* from this existential condition, in the sense of leading a life that prevents the disposition to anxiety from actualizing. The following section expands on one mode of such flight.

Before we proceed, however, an important conceptual point is in order. In referring to the existential condition articulated in this section, I alternated between “fear of death,” "fear of finitude," "terror of death," and "anxiety ."As we shall see shortly, there are ways to be *afraid* of death that are instead attempting to avoid—or escape—the *terror* of death as described in this section. Therefore, to avoid confusion and ambiguity, I shall henceforth stick to “anxiety” in referring to the phenomenon discussed here. I chose anxiety because Hegel uses this term in his most famous reference to death—as part of the master-slave dialectic. The enslaved person, he says, "has been anxious—not for this or that, or just at odd moments, but for [his] whole being” (PhG 134, ¶194).[12] In predicting anxiety on the

existence or being *as such*—rather than a specific danger or prospect—this use approximates what I mean by anxiety, albeit with a crucial caveat. Hegel refers to a concrete instance—perhaps the most forceful affective instance imaginable—while I describe an existential condition in the sense of an affective *disposition*. Therefore, my use of "anxiety"—based on Hegel's outlook—is also a tribute to later thinkers (such as Kierkegaard and Heidegger) who have developed this element of his outlook and made it conceptually explicit.

2. Fleeing Anxiety: The Denial of Finitude

Much as modern civil society, as I argued in the previous section, disposes its members to death-related anxiety, people also try to *ignore* their finitude. Hegel suggests as much when he says: "[w]e hear numerous sermons on the insecurity, vanity, and instability of temporal things, but all who hear them, however moved they may be, believe that they will nonetheless retain what is theirs" (PhR §324Z). I call this problem *the denial of finitude*.

Hegel relates the denial of finitude to yet another ethical phenomenon. "In peace," he says, "people become stuck in their ways. Their particular characteristics become increasingly rigid and ossified" (PhR §324Z). In the *Natural Law* essay, he glosses this ossified or rigid life as "becoming habituated" to "determinate characteristics [*Bestimmtheiten*]" (NL 141). We can infer, then, that the finitude-denying individual leads a life habituated in some problematic manner. I call this problematically habituated life *ossification* and propose that it denotes the respect in which people's lives manifest their denial of finitude.

In his early writings, shortly before his claim discussed above that "death must have become terrifying," Hegel describes the society that this terror informs:

> The administration of the state machine was entrusted to a small number of citizens, and these served only as single cogs […] the end [the citizens] set before themselves in their political life was gain, maintenance, and perhaps vanity. (1:206; ETW 156)

This early reference to the "state-machine," much like likening individuals to "cogs" in it, " prefigures his later claim that modern civil society is prone to ossification and rigidity. Also, the talk about

individuals concerned with gain or vanity seems relevant, to say the least, to modern market conditions. Therefore, given its location, this passage reveals continuity in Hegel’s thought concerning the axis between anxiety and ossification. My goal in this section is to show how the disposition to anxiety explains ossification. It explains it, I shall argue, that ossification constitutes an attempt to escape finitude or, more specifically, prevent the *disposition* to anxiety (constitutive of our finitude) from generating *actual* anxiety.

In making this argument, we must clarify what Hegel means by ossification in a sense that satisfies two desiderata: it is somehow (1) inherent to the workings of modern civil society *and* (2) connects with the subject’s relationship with her finitude. Having (1) in mind, we could examine the institutions that compose modern civil society and promote ossification, namely, repetitive and rigid patterns of activity—such as large-scale factories and what Hegel calls "corporations." While this seems like part of his concern, my focus—in line with my overall argument in this paper and in order to satisfy desideratum (2)—is instead on the *psychological* factors that incline the modern individual to discipline her life to give it ossified and rigid character.

Fortunately, we can help ourselves to a pair of roughly synonymous terms that Hegel often uses pejoratively—*Eigensinn* and *Eigenwille*, self-will—and that sit right at the juncture of three concerns animating my argument. First, Hegel characterizes the person possessed by self-will as inflexible and rigid, thereby imbuing the notion of ossification with psychological or "inward" depth. Second, he seems to understand the preponderance of self-willed subjects as a problem *inherent to civil society*. Third, Hegel explicitly connects self-will with ignorance concerning one’s finitude. Let me discuss these points in turn, showing how, through self-will, we get an account of ossification that meets the desiderata articulated above.

To begin with the first point—self-will as ossification—consider the following characterizations taken from the *Philosophy of Right*. The self-willed person has a rigid fixation on a particular pattern of conduct (a "this," PhR §7Z), sticking to it if only because she has the “right” to (PhR §37Z). She is “emotionally limited” and merely exercising her “argumentative understanding” [*(räsonierende Verstand*; 7: 249) in the sense that ethical, emotional, or intellectual challenges from others leave her cold. While commitment to one’s

actions or beliefs is obviously necessary too, Hegel seems to think that one should be open to dialectical changes (namely, exercise her "reason," *Vernunft*) in response to good reasons, caring for finding middle ground with the people she shares her life with.

Importantly, we need not understand self-will as necessarily concerned with self-interest in the market-economic sense. A self-righteous "Kantian" person who likes to repeat the same (however lofty and "universal") justifications for her conduct could be considered self-willed, in my interpretation. Admittedly, this is at odds with the claim that the self-willed person vindicates her conduct in reference to her *right* to do what she pleases. However, I take this point to be not about how the subject would consciously or verbally justify her conduct ("because I so want" rather than "because this is what the Categorical Imperative dictates") but about what *motivates* her. *Her psychological need to maintain her rigid, ossified mindset* shapes or motivates the self-willed subject's conduct. Even if she speaks on behalf of altruistic causes (and believes they motivate her), she is obsessed with protecting her ego from changes and challenges.

The concept of self-will, then, captures the *psychological cause* of ossification. Having it in view, we can understand a rigid pattern of *external* activity in terms of an *inward* rigid self-conception. Insofar as I think of myself as having specific and rigid needs, views, and aspirations, my everyday conduct would be rigid as a result. Warning of the perils of habituation, Hegel says that "[h]uman beings even die as a result of habit – that is if they have become totally habituated to life and mentally and physically blunted" (PhR §151Z). From the perspective I propose, this kind of "dead" habituation happens not only if the world ceases to pose new challenges but because the subject, given a psychological need for stability—self-will—*avoids* such challenges, instead sticking to the familiar. A carpenter, for example, would keep building the same furniture, thinking of himself as having a limited, however impressive, set of skills ("This is who I am," he is telling himself, perhaps adding, "I'm too old to change"). Unlike an artist, say, who ideally lets his work—and the objects he works with—change him, the self-willed individual represents the objects he works with as mere "dead" matter. *Eigensinn*, Hegel says, is "only a skill which is master over things" (PhG 13; ¶196).

So far, self-will is the psychological aspect of ossification, but how does it relate to Hegel's understanding of modern civil society? In the

Philosophy of Right (as elsewhere), the notion of self-will figures in warnings about the perils inherent to *overly* asserting one’s individual identity and standpoint in a way that loses sight of the truth (self-will as obstinate "argumentation," *Räsonieren*), the common good, or the everyday emotional work of tuning oneself to multiple points of views and feelings. Insofar as civil society is the ethical sphere in which individual self-assertion reaches its climax—indeed, its success in generating wealth and progress is premised on the individual pursuing “his own own end and all else means nothing to him” (PhR §182Z)—we can see why its members are inherently prone to become self-willed. Accordingly, when Hegel presents the notion of Ethical Life [*Sittlichkeit*]—that is, the need to go *beyond* moral subjectivity and its ideal of “self-standing particularity”—he says that through membership in this all-encompassing community, “the self-will of the individual and his conscience in its attempt to exist for itself and in opposition to the ethical substantiality, have disappeared” (PhR §152). We can infer, then, that to avoid self-will—associated with practices typical of civil society—individuals must engage in spheres of Ethical Life that challenge individual independence, one of which (along the family) is the state. Not only does the state have a role in countering self-will, but, more specifically, Hegel's dialectic in the *Philosophy of Right* suggests that the state does so *through making war*. Thus, war is introduced right after Hegel warns of "the dissolution of the existing life of the state by opinion and *argumentation* as they seek to assert their contingent character” (PhR §320; my italics). Earlier, he connects this predicament with the idea that freedom is “to do whatever one pleases” (PhR §319R)—both argumentation and attachment to their formal right are features of self-willed people.

That war has a role in countering self-will suggests that this concept—beyond its connection to ossification and civil society—also captures something about the subject’s relationship with her finitude. A decisive textual evidence for—and elaboration of—this idea is found in what is probably Hegel's most famous reference to death, namely, in the master-slave dialectic. Towards the end of the dialectic, having commented on the formative experience that anxiety occasioned for the enslaved person, Hegel tells us what happens if an enslaved person is engaged in labor *without* antecedently experiencing anxiety: “If consciousness fashions the thing without that initial absolute fear, it is only a vain self-will [*eitler eigner Sinn*]” (PhG 136;

¶196). Hegel suggests that self-will results from lacking a concrete confrontation with one's finitude. At the same time, he connects self-will with labor, which is both essentially habituated (hence can become *problematically* habituated) and the activity typical of members of civil society.

Taking a cue from this revealing quote, we can finally articulate how ossification—understood as the quality of the self-willed individual—amounts to the denial of finitude in the sense that it constitutes a flight from the existential condition of anxiety. In the master-slave dialectic, self-will is presented more straightforwardly due to *not* experiencing anxiety. However, we should consider the distinction (drawn in section 1) between the disposition to anxiety and an instance of anxiety. That the self-willed person did not *experience* anxiety does not imply that she does not have a *disposition* to anxiety. Indeed, insofar as such a disposition is an existential condition that becomes accessible to modern subjects—in the sense I explained above—there is no modern subject who is not so disposed of.

In order to appreciate how possessing self-will constitutes a flight from anxiety, recall the reasons why the modern bourgeois subject is disposed to anxiety: (1) seeking honor for her self-determined activity, she is confronted with the fact that, *qua* bodily creature, she is externally determined (with death ultimately signifying it); (2) Just because she is proud of her unique worldly career of self-determination, the thought of its termination can be terrifying; and (3) she is constitutively uncertain about her standing for others and about how, if at all, she will be remembered postmortem.

The first way in which self-will prevents concrete anxiety is by "turning off" factors (1) and (2). By avoiding challenges to her basic sense of herself, outlook, and way of doing things, the self-willed subject avoids occurrences that could make explicit her constitutive weakness as an externally-determined, mortal creature—occurrences like inner conflict, failure to understand (herself or the world), perplexedness, loss of self-control, even self-loathing (namely, the affective disposition that partly informs anxiety). In this way, cause (1) for anxiety is diminished. At the same time, since the subject's sense of uniqueness and success is informed by struggling with external determination and overcoming it, the fact that she avoids this challenge decreases her sense of uniqueness and, thereby, what she stands to lose in death (thus, cause [2] is countered). The abovementioned carpenter

might think: "I'm just a skilled professional, like many others, no great loss." Such a thought is more difficult to attribute to a subject who considers her life a unique creation, accompanied by both the joys and pains of struggle.

The second way the self-willed subject avoids anxiety is through “turning off” reason (3), namely, the uncertainty regarding her identification with the community. To recall, the modern bourgeois, unlike the ancient citizen, cannot rest assured concerning her postmortem presence. She is prone to ask herself what her life means to others and compares her achievements to fellow professionals. This predicament, however, testifies to a *yearning* that the subject still *minds about*—and is oriented towards—the community. The self-willed person, I suggest, gives up the yearning and the painful uncertainty it involves. She could do so by avoiding thinking about her reputation, instead immersing herself in her rigid, ossified everyday life. At the same time, giving up this yearning could also be manifested in fantasies about postmortem presence that are independent of how concrete members of her community would remember her—e.g., through religious ideas of the afterlife that are dependent only on what *God* thinks of the subject.[14]

Let me conclude so far. I have argued that ossification, rigidity, or problematic habituation should be understood in terms of what Hegel calls self-will—a psychological mechanism that allows the subject to avoid anxiety. A self-willed life, then, exhibits what I call “denial of finitude”—not in the sense that the subject necessarily denies (theoretically) her ultimate passing away, but in the sense that such a life is (practically) not truthful to the existential condition of finitude. This condition, to recall, consists of a tension between two poles: the subject’s rational striving for self-determination *and* the fact that, *qua* natural, she is externally determined. Both ways in which the self-willed person attempts to avoid anxiety reflect an attempt to ignore, repress, or even suppress the latter pole, external determination, including the sense in which living in a community—minding about what concrete others think of me, is an acknowledgment of external determination. The self-willed person then *anxiously* avoids failures, including disregarding those in whose eyes she may appear to be failing. "Anxiously” is the quality of an activity whose point is to flee from anxiety.[15]

So far, the claim that a self-willed life is not existentially truthful avoids a fundamental truth about human life. However, is it necessarily also a *psychological* problem? Granted, we can see how a community of finitude-denying subjects would be a depressing environment to live in, at least if you are not one of those ossified, self-willed individuals.[16] However, is finitude-denial a problem *for* the finitude-denying subject?

Hegel's answer is positive. Towards the end of his treatment of "moral subjectivity" in the *Philosophy of Right*, he points to yet another ethical ill that looms over modern civil society: "the torment of vacuity [*Leerheit*] and negativity" (PhR 141Z). I suggest understanding this problem concerning the figure of the self-willed subject. While "vacuity" could refer to a lack of determination or activity, I believe it also applies to an activity in which the subject is not properly *invested*. "Negativity" could be understood as describing the self-willed subject's chief concern with maintaining her ego, negating challenges that could complicate her life and thereby also leave her life meaningless, "vacuous," or dull.

In fact, "boredom" [*Langweile*] comes up in one of Hegel's definitive statements on the modern predicament—in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*. He says it is a time of "frivolity and boredom" (PhG 10; ¶11). While boredom may seem like a trifling matter, Hegel writes within a tradition in which this affect has existential depth. As Kant says of boredom in his *Anthropology*—bringing it together with vacuity and anxiety—it is "the void of sensations we perceive in ourselves, arousing a horror and, as it were, the presentiment of a slow death" (7: 233; *Anthropology, History, and Education* 337). Much as Kant's characterization is hyperbolic, losing sight of everyday instances of boredom,[17] It does point to a certain truth, namely, that boredom often covers an existential and psychological abyss that we are too anxious to explore. Indeed, in my interpretation of Hegel, we can say that boredom is an affective manifestation of the denial of finitude—of a self-willed life that avoids facing anxiety.[18]

The denial of finitude is not just an existential or philosophical mistake. Instead, beyond the pain of social and emotional isolation (for those still capable of feeling it), denial of finitude is coupled with the psychological burden of emptiness and boredom. Therefore, the flight from our finitude and disposition to anxiety—so common in

modern civil society, according to Hegel—seems like a recipe for an unhappy life.

Conclusion: Hegel's Political Phenomenology

I have argued that Hegel conceives of anxiety as an existential condition—a disposition that obtains in any human individual as such. In modernity, given the practices and forms of recognition that characterize the economic sphere (what Hegel calls civil society), this disposition is especially apt to actualize itself, troubling people with fear of death. However, civil society also offers arrangements that allow people to deny their finitude—or flee from anxiety—yet the price is ossification, social isolation, and even boredom.

While Hegel's conception of the state—as opposed to civil society—is beyond the scope of this paper, I would like to conclude by briefly indicating how my argument reveals one piece in a more extensive Hegelian doctrine: his *political phenomenology*.

Since Hegel understands anxiety as a *social* problem—grounded in specific socio-political conditions—it makes sense that his remedy would be social, too. More specifically, he argues that war is the remedy to the denial of finitude and ossification in modern civil society. War is necessary, Hegel says, because "[i]t is *necessary* that the finite—such as property and life—should be *posited* as contingent" (PhR §324). War reveals finite things *as* contingent, making them *known* as what they are. Since war, in Hegel's view, is an action that only a state can perform, an individual can *face* her finitude—becomes aware of it rather than deny it—through being *politically* affiliated, namely, a citizen of a state. We can say that Hegel offers us a phenomenological account of the state—or a *political phenomenology*—in the sense that we see how the state responds to structural features of subjective experience, namely, the disposition to anxiety.

Importantly, given the role of war in shaping subjective experience, Hegel gives much attention to the act of individual *self-sacrifice* demanded in war. Furthermore, what matters to Hegel is less the act of self-sacrifice itself and more the subject's dispositional *willingness* to self-sacrifice. He stresses that patriotism—as the "willingness to perform extraordinary sacrifices and actions"—is grounded in "that *disposition* which, in the normal conditions and circumstances of life,

habitually knows the community as the substantial basis and end" (PhR §268R; italics mine).[19] The act of self-sacrifice arises from habituated patriotism, which consists *inter alia* in acknowledging the state as worthwhile of sacrifice.

Having the disposition to sacrifice in place does not require participating in a war but being disposed to it if the need arises and her state summons the subject. On its face, such a disposition could be cultivated only by concrete instances of self-sacrifice, or at least (since actual self-sacrifice would kill the subject) by attending an actual war and looking death in the eyes. Consider, however, that in *Anthropology*, Hegel asserts that it would be "absurd" to assume that "because crime is considered in the *Philosophy of Right* as a *necessary* appearance of the human will, therefore the commission of the crime is supposed to be made an inevitable necessity for *every* individual" (E3 §408Z). Rather, he claims, crime can appear in reduced or partial forms such as "limitations, errors or non-criminal wrongdoing." I propose that Hegel has a similar logic in mind for the necessity of war. It does not follow that a given state must wage war, but rather that war-making, as a power that defines the state, is a "real possibility," as Carl Schmitt calls it (*Concept of the Political*, 33; as opposed to a mere logical possibility).

For the sake of cultivating the disposition to sacrifice, it is sufficient that citizens represent war as a real possibility, summoning them, as it were, to make the proper inner resolution. Such a representation could be effected in various ways: through engagement with national history (or myth) and the role wars played in it, national holidays that commemorate such wars, and aesthetic media (stories, theater, music) that dramatize them. All such means make the individual ask herself: What would *I* do in this circumstance? Admittedly, such means include, in Hegel's view, the *future* possibility of war, projected by national, political, and cultural discourse. That Hegel resists Kant's dream of an "international government" and supports keeping a standing army indicates this (PhR §324Z). However, rejecting Kant's vision does not imply that war is imminent. However, only that—through dismissing a strict condition of *no* wars forever—remains on the political horizon. Therefore, I believe that Hegel's celebration of self-sacrifice—understood as a disposition to this effect—and similarly, the claim that war is ethically necessary

does not entail that he envisions war-making as a constant, or even occasional, feature of the modern state's operation.

Finally, even if we want to ultimately (or outright) reject Hegel's glorification of self-sacrifice and war, there is still much merit in appreciating the existential and psychological problems he diagnoses in modern civil society. One could agree with Hegel about this problem yet seek solutions that are not "national"—such as religious or aesthetic pursuits that offer the subject a higher meaning to live and even to die for (including a political or revolutionary cause—a war *against* the state rather than in its service). In articulating this problem, Hegel prefigures the existentialist tradition (as occasional connections I draw along the paper wished to indicate). However, he challenges the individualist and even elitist or perfectionist image of this tradition. To him, existential concerns and their psychological byproducts seem to trouble *everybody* and, moreover, should be addressed en masse by social and political institutions—call it Hegel’s existentialism for the masses.

End notes

1. In references to the theological *Jugend-Schriften*, I cite volume and page number in *Werke* followed by page number in Knox's translation (if the passage was translated). References to the *Philosophy or Right* are in section number, sometimes accompanied by R (Remark) or Z (*Zusatz*, Addition). Same with references to each part of the *Encyclopedia*. I rely on standard academic translations but sometimes modify them based on *Werke*. About the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, I cite page number in the German Meiner edition followed by paragraph number in Miller's translation. About the *Philosophy of History*, I only cite a volume and page number in *Werke*.

2. This is not to say that all conceptions of death are on par with Hegel. There is a *truth* about death that progressively becomes available to subjects. Modernity is the culmination of this process.

3. *The Hour of Death*, 403-6. See Strauss, "The State of Death," 3-4. Jonathan Strauss suggests that Hegel was the first modern philosopher to theorize this emerging signification of death ("The State of Death," 3-4).

4. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 56

5. See also Hyppolite, "The Concept of Life and Existence in Hegel," Merleau-Ponty, "Hegel's Existentialism," and Bataille, "Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice."

6. References to Kant are to volume and page number in the *Gesammelte Schriften*, followed by the English translation.

7. In English translations, *verachten* and its cognates are translated variably to "contempt," "despise," or "loath." Such variety (also with other affects) disguises the consistency and depth of Hegel's psychological and existential thought and must be one reason why it is not sufficiently appreciated

8. I say "practices" since what matters concerning the power of a conception of freedom to affect the subject is not whether she consciously endorses it, i.e., *believes* that this is what freedom means, but whether she practically lives this conception, in virtue of having been inculcated to it and given social and cultural conventions that sustain it. Thus, a feminist woman may believe that the ideal of a woman in her respective culture—e.g., as a caring mother and loyal wife—is misguided, yet—given the regrettable social and cultural force of this ideal—nonetheless feel guilty for failing it. Such a woman, then, *practices* this normative ideal, albeit not consciously endorsing it.

9. For a comprehensive account, see Katz's "Alleviating Love's Rage: Hegel on Shame and Sexual Recognition."

10. He contrasts the centrality of love for the Greek spirit with “the spirit of Judaism” (1: 276-7; ETW 184-5). See also 12: 309, where he stresses the relatable concreteness of the ancient community (“this Athens, this Sparta”).

11. For accounts of honor in comparison with love, see Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 111-130; Darwall, “Two Kinds of Respect,” 36ff; and Katz, "Love Is Only Between Living Beings Who Are Equal in Power,” 95-97. One could argue that even if romantic love consists of unconditioned affirmation, this does not apply to Greek civic or friendly love. However, Hegel excludes enslaved people and other non-citizens from this form of recognition (12: 311). Suppose one has been born and brought up well. In that case, one typically enjoys such unconditioned affirmation regardless of her actions (indeed, this kind of "aristocratic" bias is still apparent among elite groups nowadays).

12. See also 1: 185; ETW, 141, where Hegel connects anxiety with helplessness and loss of "self-trust" and warns that it could lead to madness.

13. Since self-will is intimately related to subjective self-assertion benefits, Hegel also uses it in qualifying "positive" ethical phenomena, at least in the sense that, albeit one-sided, they are necessary for the progressive realization of spirit. He characterizes as self-willed both the ancient Jews (1: 296; including the custom of growing a beard! 1: 431) and the "German Spirit" (12: 415). On one note, he even identifies self-will with masculinity (7: 318). This suggests that self-will is necessary yet one-sided and should be balanced with the flexibility and attunement to others' views and emptions that Hegel associates with femininity.

14. This seems to be the case with the ancient Jew, according to Hegel (1: 296). Hegel's account of ancient Jewry as a harbinger of modern civil society becomes a trope in 19th-century German thought (e.g., Marx's *On the Jewish Question* and Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*).

15. Hegel’s critique of self-will prefigures the existentialist occupation with how over-identification with social roles—be it Heidegger's talk of *das Man* or Sartre’s “bad faith”—serves to avoid existential challenges. Heidegger relates *das Man* to avoidance of finitude in *Being and Time*, 252-255. A well-known treatment of "bad faith" is in Sartre's *Essays in Existentialism*, 167-168.

16. Cf. Hegel’s sympathy for Jesus’ painful isolation among his ossified, fellow Jews: "Jesus could only carry the Kingdom of God in his heart

[…] in his everyday world he had to flee all living relationships because they all lay under the law of death." (1: 401; ETW 285) Of course, others were similarly isolated, but their mental life was too ossified, too "dead" to notice.

17. Shortly before, Kant quotes an observation that English people sometimes hang themselves out of boredom…

18. Cf. Hegel's reference to boredom in his critique of stoicism (PhG 140; ¶200). Kojève explains: "The Stoic ideology was invented to justify the Slave's inaction, his refusal to *fight* to *realize* his libertarian ideal" (*Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 53). The boredom of the Stoic, then, prefigures the modern bourgeois' boredom in the sense that both testify to (and cover) the fear of facing death.

19. Wood (*Hegel's Ethical Thought*, 28) interprets this passage as saying that patriotism is *not* the "disposition to sacrifice oneself." However, Hegel says that the latter arises from the former [*aus dem sich begründet*].

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Abbreviations used:

Early Theological Writings	ETW
Encyclopedia (for first and third parts)	E1, 3
Philosophy of Right	PhR
Phenomenology of Spirit	PhG
Lectures on Natural Law	NL
Lectures on Fine Art	LFA

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