

# Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics

## Hegel's Concept of the Free Will: Towards a Redefinition of an Old Question

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### **Publication Details**

*Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics* (ISSN: 2166-5087). March, 2015. Volume 3, Issue 1.

### **Citation**

Huesca Ramón, Fernando. 2015. "Hegel's Concept of the Free Will: Towards a Redefinition of an Old Question." *Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics* 3 (1): 309–325.

# Hegel's Concept of the Free Will: Towards a Redefinition of an Old Question

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## Abstract

The "will" is a subject of reflection *par excellence* throughout Modern Philosophy. Even Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, two stark critics of the thought agenda of the *Modern* philosophers made the "will" a center of reflection. In this paper, we intend, firstly, to tackle the question of the will, centering upon the subject of whether this "will" is free or not, and what is peculiar, on the human being, concerning this "will;" this will take us to two great thinkers of the 17th century, Spinoza and Hobbes, who in one way or the other, challenged the Cartesian notion of a "free will" or a "soul" which can freely command the body to action. We shall briefly, then, touch upon Kant's view on the matter, highlighting his conclusion (from the third antinomy of the *Critique of Pure Reason*), of the undecidability of the question of the "free will." Secondly, we shall focus our attention on Hegel's own view on the question of the will, in general, and his thoughts on the peculiarity of the human will. In this way we will embark upon an explanation of Hegel's *solution* of the *problem of the free will*, highlighting his redefinition of the problem, and the way he challenges Kant's skeptic stance, in such a way that we, in the present may, even in an empirical experimental way, ascertain the validity of his arguments. In the end, as a way of conclusion we shall, in effect, explicate, how Hegel' concept of the free will can be understood in Neurophysiological terms, and concomitantly be tested experimentally. In this way we intend to defend the notion of Hegel as a key thinker in the question of the will, and as a source of concepts and reflections, to guide philosophical and experimental research on the matter.

## Keywords

Freedom, will, idealism, executive function, causality

Freedom, Sancho, is one of the most precious gifts which were given to men by the heavens; with her no treasure hidden in the earth or sea can be made equal: for freedom, as for honor, we could and should risk our own life.

—Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra

## I

In order to explicate Hegel's concept of the *free will* we shall, firstly, sketch his general ontological position, tackling the notions of the *natural*, and the *spiritual*, and secondly, the anthropological implications of the Hegelian monistic ontology. With this

philosophical background in mind, we shall develop the complex Hegelian argument concerning the *human will*, which in the end shall be presented as an alternative to other modern theories of the will, such as Hobbes', Spinoza's and Kant's which deal with the subject *strictly* and *totally* in the "old" terms of "freedom from causality", that is, of the lacking of previous conditions to movement or change in general, being it material or mental; that will lead us to a clear understanding of the German philosopher's *compatibilist* position on the subject of the free will. Hegel's redefinition of this central subject in Philosophy of Mind opens the way for an ample dialogue and interaction between Philosophy and Neurobiology which can scarcely be stated on the basis of previous (and even later) ontological systems, and which will be sketched as a manner of conclusion.

Let us begin with a substantive Hegelian ontological fragment:

Man is, on the one side, a natural being (*natürliches Wesen*). As such, he conducts himself according to arbitrariness and chance; as a restless, subjective being. He does not distinguish between the essential, and the unessential. On the other side, he is a spiritual, rational being (*geistiges, vernünftiges Wesen*). From this side *he is not from nature, what he should be*. [...] Man must bring his two sides in agreement; that is, to make his singularity adequate to his rational side, or to make this one, the dominant one. (Hegel, 1986a, 258)<sup>1</sup>

This passage taken from a philosophical handbook,<sup>2</sup> prepared by Hegel for *Gymnasium*<sup>3</sup> students presents the nucleus of the Hegelian Ontology; in other words, the principle, that man is *on the one side* "a natural being", and *on the other side* "a spiritual, rational being" states a "monistic" worldview, which is neither materialistic *à la* Hobbes, nor

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1. All translations in this paper from German and Spanish sources are ours.
  2. That is the so called *Pflichtenlehre* (Doctrine of duties): *Rechts-, Pflichten- und Religionslehre für die Unterklasse* (Doctrine of right, duties und religion for the elementary class). This bibliographic source can be considered as a summary or didactic exposition, thought for "secondary-school" students, of the Philosophical doctrine of Right presented in the *Philosophy of Right*.
  3. *Das Gymnasium* was in Hegel's time an educational institution, whose main aim was to prepare German youths for University "superior" studies, especially those studies concerning the Humanities or what would later be called *Geisteswissenschaften* (Social sciences). Hegel wrote four reports between 1810 and 1816 concerning the goals of "secondary" education and the teaching of Philosophy in Secondary Schools (such as the *Gymnasium*) and University; they are published in volume 4 of the Suhrkamp edition of Hegel's Complete Works (Hegel, 1986a).

pantheistic (in the sense of the thesis: “all is God”) à la Spinoza; the task to explicate, in detail, all the notions and categories in play in such a philosophical view would take us far from our main task in this work, given that Hegel himself does not defend a radical revolutionary worldview which rejects previous philosophical positions (as Kant,<sup>4</sup> for instance, does); rather, he intends to question and criticize previous Ontologies, from the Presocratics to Schelling, in order to make evident, the inherent contradictions and partiality of conclusions and results of previous Philosophies while he integrates them in a complex philosophical architectonic. In that sense, the full explication of the Hegelian standpoint would coincide with a wide critic of the History of Philosophy until Schelling. Nevertheless, we do intend to present the *gist* of Hegel’s Ontology; for that purpose, let us state the Ontological basis for understanding the anthropological view presented in the passage above: man is an ontological unity, in such a way, that it is not feasible to invoke a supernatural point of view (which Kant does) in order to understand his character as a “material” existence and as an entity capable of “mental operations;” on the contrary, Hegel’s proposal is to consider, at all times, man (and any other philosophical subject) as a *unity*, as a convergence of diverse categories or modes of being/thought (any idealist Philosophy comes, in one way or the other to such view of the identity of such instances), in a way, that any dualism (the sensible/the ideal, soul/body, inclination/duty, life/concept, etc.) comes to be just a mode in which apparently contradictory terms, are thought of unilaterally and partially (and as such, *wrongly*). So, it is not that the natural and the spiritual consist of different ontological realms, rather, the natural consists of a mode of being/thought of the spiritual, in such a way, that the *natural mode* of being, can be transformed or converted into the *spiritual mode* of being<sup>5</sup> and vice versa.<sup>6</sup>

Now, we must yet sketch precisely, how Hegel defines such a thing as *nature*, or a “natural being,” and *spirit*, or a “spiritual being.”

Concerning nature, the author of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* states the following: “On the one side, nature means, the natural being, as we find ourselves constituted on different sides immediately; the immediate side of our being” (Hegel, 1974, 76). Such a

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4. We consider the Kantian worldview as a specific form of ontological dualism; that is, Kant, in the end, accepts and states, that there *are* two kinds or sets of things (entities, beings, etc.): *noumena* and *phenomena*.

5. Examples of this change of *mode* can be *any* economic production (of a commodity, a tool, a machine, etc.), and the work of art. In both instances it is possible to argue, in a Hegelian manner, for the “impression of *human ends* into matter. One could call this impression of human ends: *spiritualization*.

6. Such as in death.

Philosophical standpoint is based upon an Absolute Idealism<sup>7</sup> which defends the thesis that *only* thought or that which is the product of thought is, strictly speaking *real* – *wirklich* –, or even *is* in a strong or higher sense: “Intelligence (*Intelligenz*) knows, that, that which is *thought* (*gedacht*), *is*; and that that which *is*, only *is*, in so far as it is a thought (*Gedanke*)” (Hegel, 1991, 378). So, according to this view, the question for the ontological status of such beings as planets, trees, jellyfish, etc., lies, not in negating that such beings, *exist* or *are*, in one way or the other, rather, the decisive point lies on the notion, that, on the one side, *we*, as human beings (actually, we ourselves define ourselves as such, in an exercise of *thought!*), find such *empirical* or *perceptual* elements, already as given, we do not recognize them as a creation or production of ours, rather as just *being there* when we come to find them within our daily life, experience, or scientific research; on the other side, *we*, (again, as human beings) consider (with good reasons, one may advance) them precisely as *unable* to come to the understanding or cognition<sup>8</sup> that they themselves are just *given* entities, which *of themselves*, or *caused by* themselves are unable to make out of themselves something different from that which they *already* are; in Hegel’s words: “The formation (*Formierung*) of plants, of animals, consists only in maintaining their natural being, or in that this is modified only a little” (Hegel, 1983a,

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7. According to F. Beiser, the doctrine of Absolute Idealism has the following traits: “First, there is a single universal substance in nature, which is the absolute. Second, this absolute consists in living force, so that it is neither subjective nor objective, but the unity of them both. Third, through its organic structure all of nature conforms to a purpose, plan, or design, which is not created by God but inherent in matter itself. The first proposition makes absolute idealism a form of monism; the second makes it a form of vitalism; and the third makes it a species of idealism” (Beiser, 2000, 34). In a general way, one may, following these considerations, characterize Hegel’s philosophical system as a form of Absolute Idealism, the single substance being *spirit*, the “living force” being *will*, and the “purpose, plan or design” inherent in matter being *self-cognition*.
  8. We may speak, without contrition of “consciousness” too, but we prefer to avoid such Philosophical territory, in order to put forward our main argument, concerning the Hegelian notion of *free will*. Nevertheless, Hegel’s definition of consciousness is as follows: “Consciousness (*Bewusstsein*), in general, is the relation of the I (*Ich*) to an object (*Gegenstand*), whether it is an internal or an external object.” (Hegel, 1986, 204). This early Hegelian definition of consciousness is surprisingly similar to that explored by Husserl and Husserlian Phenomenology in the XXth century: “One could say that wherever and however there exists that which I call consciousness (*conciencia*), I find it always constituted by two elements: an attitude or act of a subject, and a ‘something’ toward which such act is directed to” (Ortega y Gasset, 1963, 62).

228).<sup>9</sup> So, a natural being or thing, is, strictly speaking, that which cannot be made something other from what it already is, except by some *external* intervention.<sup>10</sup>

Concerning spirit, “the most sublime concept of all” (Hegel, 1986b, 28), the following passage from the 1824/25 lecture on the Philosophy of Right is helpful: “Spirit (*Geist*) is thinking (*Denken*) in general, and man is different from the animal through thought” (Hegel, 1974b, 102). Though Hegel does not offer here a wide definition of “spirit” (which, in any case, is the philosophical task of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the whole Hegelian system), at least we get a sense, of where the nucleus of the question lies: spirit, contrary to nature, is not a *given*, an immediate “reality”, rather, it is a process, and a result as well (this is an essential point in the *Phenomenology*<sup>11</sup>); “of what?” may the reader ask; to which the Hegelian answer states: *of thought*. This standpoint leads to understandings and theses such as: *spirit is its own concept presented in and through thought, spirit is self-thinking thought, thought as subject and object as well, is spirit*;<sup>12</sup> now, we must decisively state that this sentences do not constitute mere tautologies, pseudo-propositions or mad jabber, such as Schopenhauer, Carnap and others would urge us to conclude;<sup>13</sup> on the contrary, they are nothing but a succinct and *general* summary of the whole architectonic of concepts and argumentations in which the Hegelian system consists of. It would be only just to conclude that *spirit* is a set of logical, physical,

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9. Along this paper we shall make use of several Hegelian sources on the Philosophy of Right; that is, apart from the “print” *Philosophy of Right*, we shall make use of manuscripts of the Hegelian courses on Philosophy of Right, which the German philosopher imparted between 1817 and 1831, and which were, though in a fragmentary and sometimes incomplete way, “recorded” by students.
  10. One can now understand and even defend the Hegelian argument which states, that it is precisely the role of culture (*Bildung*) to introduce from *outside into* the children the determinations of the spiritual. A child without culture would be pretty much just an animal, such as is, in the beginning, the feral lad of Werner Herzog’s *The Enigma of Caspar Hauser*. Interestingly Hegel and his family were well acquainted with the Kaspar Hauser *affaire* around 1829; Hegel’s mother-in-law, Susanne von Tucher, wrote in that year to the philosopher’s wife: “Kaspar thanks you for your interest, of which I have told him” (Tucher *apud* Beyer, 1966, 101).
  11. “The True is the Whole. The Whole, however, is only the essence which realizes itself through its development. From the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that it only in the *end* (*Ende*) is, that which it truly is” (Hegel, 1986b, 24).
  12. The reader may analyze the whole Hegelian *corpus* and indeed find these very same sentences stated as such, in one way or the other.
  13. See Schopenhauer’s *On the Philosophy at the University* and Carnap’s *The overcoming of Metaphysics through the logical analysis of language*.

chemical, biological, anthropological, psychological, juridical, moral, economical, political, aesthetical, religious, philosophical, and historical categories, which *explain* what *reality* is (which at the same time cannot but explain what *man* is). In Hegel words: "Spirit is not an abstract thing; it is, essentially, a system which differentiates within itself" (Hegel, 1983b, 64). A *system of concepts*, which, one may consider, is presented in an utmost summarily way in the Hegelian *Encyclopedia*.<sup>14</sup>

Now, we may return to that previous position which states than man "*is not from nature, what he should be;*" indeed, if there is an *essential* difference, between plants, animal and man, is this deontological character *unique* to man. In this sense, man not only *is*, but possesses (or conceives, which would be pretty much the same, in the Hegelian view), a certain *ideal*, archetypical, or deontological dimension, which constrains his own actions, as well as places him within a determinate frame of *valid* interaction with other human beings; in Hegel's own words: "The animal is not in conflict with what it should be; man, on the other side, must know precisely that: what he should do, to conceive what he should do; and, in this way, to give his will (*Willen*), his sentiments (*Gefühlen*), his impulses (*Trieben*), a true content" (Hegel, 1974a, 495). To state it simply: human beings, *necessarily*, conceive a self-definition as agents, and a frame of acceptable social behavior: naturally, there is a historical side of this self-definition and social behavior, which is explained by Hegel in terms of *evolution of the human mind*, or which is the same, the "development of spirit" (Hegel, 1991, 315).

Now, this leads us to a decisive step in our argument, namely, the definition of "will" and of such a thing as a "true content" for this will. Notoriously there is an utmost complex philosophical explication (at least more complex than that which one may find in Hobbes, Spinoza and Kant, three great figures in the Modern debate concerning *freedom of the will*) concerning the matter, which is developed in the *Philosophy of Right* in paragraphs §5, §6 and §7, following an argumentative development closely based upon theoretical background from the *Science of Logic*, as Klau Vieweg defends;<sup>15</sup> in Hegel's words: "We must now consider: 1. will in general, 2. particular will, natural and

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14. Concomitantly one may consider that the Hegelian lectures on the Philosophy of Right, the Philosophy of Art, the Philosophy of Religion, the History of Philosophy, and the Philosophy of History are wider presentations of the very same subject matter of the *Enciclopedia*; and as such, the ultimate subject matter in them is *spirit*.

15. "The fundamental determinedness of the concept of the free will as 'principle and beginning of the Science of Right' can only be inferred and understood in connection to Hegel's innovative logic" (Vieweg, 2012, 57).

reflexive will, 3. free will in and for itself, which determines itself also; nonetheless in its determinacy this will remains a really free will. §5, §6 and §7 give this moments” (Hegel, 2012, 43). So, Hegel means that such thing as a will<sup>16</sup> has a tripartite character: first, the possibility of abstracting from any specific content: second, the possibility of resolution to action (that means the abandonment of the tenacity of abstraction and refusal to action); third, the possibility of taking as an action guideline or principle, not just the satisfaction of impulses or desires, being what they may (Hegel would speak of *finite ends*<sup>17</sup>), but that which expresses the very essence or character of will, namely, concrete universality (Hegel would speak of *infinite ends*<sup>18</sup>). The reader may indeed miss the clarity and precision of Hobbes, Spinoza and Kant, but it is also indeed *impossible* at all, to extract from Hegel a “simple” definition, which would not *necessarily* end up in a plea for *universality* or for articulation into a wider *system of concepts*. So, for the sake of understanding the gist of Hegel’s theory of the will, let us add some additional remarks, in order to give a final conclusion to the matter.

“The will, as the interior determinant concept, is essentially *activity (Tätigkeit)* and *action (Handlung)*. It translates its interior determinations into an exterior existence, in order to present itself as *Idea*”<sup>19</sup> (Hegel, 1986a, 57). Apart from the definition of will that we obtain here (“the interior determinant concept”) we get an intensive view on the nucleus of the Hegelian theory of the will, namely, the thesis of the *translation* of “interior determinations into an exterior existence”, in order words, that the essence of the will is *action*,<sup>20</sup> understood as a change in the world caused, not just by chance, or by blind movement, but by a certain intentionality and causation-by-agent; “To *action (Handlung)* belongs, above all, only that, which was in the decision (*Entschluss*) or consciousness” (*ibid.*) states Hegel, intending precisely to argue that in action, properly

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16. That means: *human will*. Hegel would concede the use of the *coniunctum verborum* “animal will”, if by such it is understood simply: instinct and avidity.

17. See Hegel (1979, 277)

18. See Hegel (1983a, 110)

19. This fragment comes from a philosophical Encyclopedia for Gymnasium students. Together, with the philosophical Handbook on rights and duties quoted above, this is the most didactic and synthetic exposition of the Hegelian thought concerning ethics and political philosophy. *The Philosophy of Right* may be more systematic, developed and exhaustive, but it lacks the freshness and pedagogical character of this two earlier ethical and political sources.

20. Hegel states in the Hotho manuscript from the course on Philosophy of Right of 1822/23: “A will, which does not decide or resolves itself to action, is not a real will (*wirklicher Wille*)” (Hegel, 1974a, 130).

speaking, it is decisive the intending, of the acting agent, of causation of a change in the external world, in other words, an action is a product of a decision or resolution of an acting agent, and this resolution takes place *in* him, so one must unconditionally conclude, that such a resolution *belongs* to him, that such a resolution is *his* and no one else's. One may also guess, that this theoretical position has relevant juridical and moral consequences (indeed, such is the very same Hegelian understanding of the matter, as we will see later).

We may now state a concise Hegelian summary of the arguments presented until this point: "All determinations of the will can be called ends or purposes (*Zwecke*), determinations, which should be valid" (Hegel, 1979, 59). This statement is decisive, and as a matter of fact, marks the acute controversy which Hegel maintains with Kantian Idealism<sup>21</sup>: will has *necessarily* determinations or specifications (that is precisely the logical-philosophical argument on paragraph §6 of the *Philosophy of Right* – will cannot stay at an abstract point of indeterminacy, it must, *resolve* to *something*), and inherent to any such specification is *action*, that is, to make the external meet the requirements of the internal, the world to the ends.<sup>22</sup> Hegel speaks of "natural will (*natürliche Wille*)", "arbitrariness (*Willkür*)", and "reflexive will (*reflektierende Wille*)", (Hegel, 1983a, 217) precisely to describe this mind-to-world direction of human agency, to express it in contemporary terms; the decisive here is that what is at stake is the satisfaction, of impulses or desires ("natural", or "artificial"<sup>23</sup>), through determinate means, the

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21. "The particular will should be adequate to the universal Will, this unity is postulated; man should be moral, but this stays at the level of a mere *should* (*Sollen*) [...] We stay here, therefore, on the level of a mere talk about morality" (Hegel, 1986c, , 369). So, Hegel's ultimate controversy with Kantian Ethics lies in this simple question: is it enough that a subject or a will *intends* to do "the good" without doing *anything at all*, in a concrete way? Hegel rejects totally the *practical* relevance of such moral individual deliberations. To state it in a Goethian *dictum* with which Hegel completely agrees: *man is what he does*.
  22. Hegel expresses this in this way: "Through *acting*, the interior practical determinations (*innerlichen praktischen Bestimmungen*) obtain an exteriority, that is, an exterior existence. Inversely, this can be considered in this way: an immediate exteriority is cancelled, and is made concordant to the interior determination" (Hegel, 1986a, 205).
  23. Notoriously, Hegel refuses to draw a clear and distinct line between the natural and the artificial *qua* desires, impulses or needs (*Bedürfnisse*); this standpoint has relevant economic and philosophical consequences, as it implies that the multiplication of needs and means to satisfy them, peculiar to the Modern World, far from being a matter of lamentation and diatribes *à la* Rousseau, is a matter of economic and philosophical celebration, as it means the conquest of spirit (or man, which is the same) over nature, in the material and the intellectual. (See §190 of the *Philosophy of Right* and its equivalents in the manuscripts of *Philosophy of Right*).

specifically human in the matter consisting in the *reflective* character of the action, which in simple terms signifies the choosing of the adequate *means* to the *ends*, and being in the possibility of eventually, *refraining* from action<sup>24</sup>. On a simple (finite, in Hegelian terms) level that is what makes human *actions* different from animal *instinctive* engagements with the world.

On a complex (infinite, in Hegelian terms) level, it is required, not only that a will resolves itself to action or that it renounces execution of ends; indeed, the end of an agent may be this or that, to buy chocolate ice cream or an opera ticket, to accept a job or to rob a bank. At this level, there would not be *any* criterion *at all*, to discriminate between ends, means, or actions *qua* validity, acceptability, legality, etc. The argumentative step sketched above as “free will in and for itself”, and “really free will”, the subject matter or paragraph §7 of the *Philosophy of Right*, intends precisely to argue for the necessity of such a task. Paragraph §33 of the same text defines concretely what must be understood as the determinations of “really free will:” “According to the process-steps of the development of the Idea of the free will in and for itself, is the will [...] *formal right (formellen Rechts)* [...] *morality (Moralität)* [and] *ethical life (Sittlichkeit)* [which in itself develops into] *family [...]* *civil society (bürgerliche Gesellschaft)* [and] *State*” (Hegel, 1979, 88). In simple terms, aside from the fact that human beings conceive ends and execute them or reject them, there is, and *must be*, a sphere of *normativity* which establishes what a valid/invalid action (*qua* execution of ends) is. That is the main task of the *Philosophy of Right*, to define categories such as property, the morally good, family-care, economic production and division of political powers, which, in the Hegelian perspective, are, in the end, categories of the *free will*.

With this last elements, we could now “easily” understand such terms as “*inferior desire faculty (niedere Begehrungsvermögen)*” (Hegel, 1986a, 205) and “*superior desire faculty (höhere Begehrungsvermögen)*” (Hegel, 1986a, 206); the first points out to the satisfaction of *any* end, independently of any determinate normativity, and the second to the fulfillment of such ends, which are concordant to the essence of character of the will itself. This last point establishes the most attractive and original, as well as polemic, argument of Hegel concerning the free will; in his own words: “In the usual

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24. Paragraph §5 of the *Pflichtenlehre* states it this way: “Through *reflection (Reflexion)* man goes beyond impulse (*Trieb*) und its limitations. He compares this impulse not only with the means of its satisfaction, but also this means with one another, and impulses with one another; and also with the ends of his being, and allows himself the conclusion of reflection, whether as a satisfaction of the impulse, or as its detention, and renunciation” (Hegel, 1986a, 206).

representation, will and intelligence appear as two distinct things. Free will, however, which has as content nothing else as itself, has its content only through thought” (Hegel, 1983b, 64). So, Hegel’s ultimate argument for the definition or, existence even, of “really free will” lies in this thoroughly metaphysical (in the sense of non-empirical) standpoint: when the will establishes as its content, not just any thing, not just any end, but itself, and the end of understanding and explaining itself as free, as non-natural, as non-animal, we have *in actu* the existence *par excellence* of such a thing as *freedom*; that is the background for the understanding of the central argument of the Hegelian Philosophy of History: “The oriental peoples [that is peoples with a patriarchal and despotic social structure] do not know that spirit, or man as such, is in itself free. As they do not know it, they are not free” (Hegel, 1986d, 31). To be free, strictly speaking, one must *know* himself to be free, and concomitantly, to will and argue for the *known* (*erkannt*) concrete determinations, and institutions of free will: private property, economic freedom,<sup>25</sup> and State founded on the rule of law (*Rechtsstaat*) are to be, according to this view, wished for and defended in order to give *free will* actuality and concrete validity.

In conclusion, the Hegelian theory of free will, does not consist of a discussion (such as is the case in Hobbes, Spinoza and Kant) of the validity or invalidity of such a concept as “uncaused cause”, “effect without previous cause” or “independence from causation;” on the contrary Hegel plainly states that will is indeed “determined by something”, and as such is “unfree;”<sup>26</sup> Hegel’s contribution to the Old Question<sup>27</sup> of the freedom of the will lies precisely in the redefinition of the *coiniunctum verborum* “free will:” a free

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25. The relationship of Hegel to Political Economy and Capitalism, in general, is complex indeed. Let us summarily state that Hegel accepts the economic category of *capital*, with the liberty of production and consumption, which it implies; nevertheless he argues for social and state institutions which safeguard human dignity as a moral and ethical agent.

26. “The will is determined (*bestimmt*) by something; therefore the will is not free (*ist nicht frei*)” (Hegel, 2012, 50).

27. By “old” here, we mean simply, present, in one way or the other, since Ancient times, for instance in the now famous thesis from Lucretius of the “swerving atoms” non subject to mechanical causality: “Again, if all movement is always interconnected, the new arising from the old in a determinate order – if the atoms never swerve so as to originate some new movement that will snap the bonds of fate, the everlasting sequence of cause and effect – what is the source of the free will possessed by living things throughout the earth?” (Lucretius *apud* Dennet, 1984, 2). On the other side, strictly speaking, the concise stating of the problem of the free will, concerning a non-theological Ontology (which would be the ultimate standpoint in Saint Augustine and Aquinas), is reached only in the *Modern World*, in *Modern Philosophy*. So, the conceptual and systematic tackling of the problem of the freedom of the will is only reached from Descartes onwards.

will, is a will which has ends, and which understands or cognizes itself, as being such an ontological instance which defines *from itself* what it itself *is* and *should be*. That this result should be arrived at *necessarily*, that is, without the intervention of a noumenal Kantian independent-of-causality faculty of ends, is, in the final picture, irrelevant for our German philosopher.

If there ever was a pure compatibilist<sup>28</sup> philosophical scheme of Philosophy of Mind, concerning freedom and causality, it is the Hegelian theory of the free will.

## II

In the present I am conscious of my reality (*Wirklichkeit*); and consequently self-consciousness find itself as matter – the soul as material, mental representations as movements and changes in the interior organ of the brain, which follow after impressions of the senses. (Hegel, 1986c, 289)

This fragment from the Hegelian lectures on the History of Philosophy seems, at first glance, to defend a strict materialist Ontology, which would be not incompatible with contemporary discussions on Philosophy on Mind;<sup>29</sup> unfortunately, we must, declare that this Hegelian argumentation occurs in a theoretical *locus* which intends, *precisely*, to denounce and criticize the partiality and unilaterality of materialist and atheistic Enlightenment Philosophies (such as Holbach's and La Mettrie's), in order to defend the centrality of categories such as *cognition*, *free will*, *right*, etc., in reality in general. Nevertheless, this allusion of Hegel to the "interior organ of the brain" is not unimportant; it shows Hegel's genuine interest in Physiology, which is also evidenced in his *Encyclopedia* explications on the "animal organism" (Hegel, 1991, 291) and the "system of embodiment of the spiritual" in man (Hegel, 1991, 328), or, in other words, with actual *organs* and *physiological systems* which underlie behavioral and cognitive processes. So, it is not that, in the end, Hegel considers Anatomy and Physiology to be

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28. Compatibilism taken to mean the philosophical acceptance of the notion of "physical" or "mental" *phaenomena* as being absolutely subjected to causation and the acceptance, as well, of the validity of the category of *freedom of the will*. In the terms of a student's manual on Philosophy of Mind: "Compatibilism says that the up-to-us-ness of our actions – our freedom to act otherwise – is entirely compatible with our actions having been all along predetermined by causes outside our control. Freedom and causal determinism are perfectly consistent" (Pink, 2004, 19).

29. For example, Daniel Wegner, Benjamin Libet, Daniel Dennet and John Searle.

irrelevant to philosophical inquiry; rather, Hegel's decisive thesis, in this matter, is simply: the empirical study of nature (which would include, in a Hegelian-inspired Ontology such entities as the corpus callosum and the limbic system), in itself important, cannot yield a complete understanding of reality, as in reality, there are elements, which are not merely *given*, but are *produced* by man's engagement with the world. Indeed, one may have a global account of the physical and chemical constitution of the world, and yet find not a single glimpse of a *right*, *the moral good*, *economic capital* and *political sovereignty*; all this instances are not material but *spiritual*, which simply means, again, that they are a result of human activity, and not merely of the execution of the DNA program inside the human cells.

In this sense, the Hegelian theory of the free will (and his whole philosophical system as well) is of great relevance to contemporary discussions on Philosophy of Mind, Philosophy of Right, Bioethics and Neuroscience.

Hegelian arguments concerning free will can be, to some extent, experimented and observed in the laboratory, as his monistic Ontology does not exclude the possibility that the mental can be instantiated in the material (on the contrary, Hegelian dialectics can be interpreted as a doctrine of the mutual interaction of the material and the mental). Spinoza argued for the *strict qualitative difference* between the material and the mental; Kant argued for the noumenal (that means, in one sense, *suprasensible*) character of the will, which may be compatible with such a thing as an *uncaused initiator of causal series* in the empirical world; in both schemes of thought neurological research on the subject of the free will is irrelevant. In Spinoza because *de facto* we already know that every material event has a previous cause (so necessarily we must exclude the existence of such a thing as a material or mental effect without a previous cause), in Kant because neurological experimental techniques can only yield information in the frame of the empirical, and as such, in the frame of phenomena constituted *a priori* by our own mental faculties, the noumenal world remaining *absolutely* closed to experimental research. Hobbes may effectively yield a thought frame compatible with neurological categories, and his definition of will as "*last Appetite in deliberating*" (Hobbes, 1929, 47) can be tested experimentally as prefrontal cortex activity preceding motor activity; concerning the question of free will, Wegner's and Libet's experiments would be completely compatible with the Hobbesian rejection of the notion of a will safeguarded from exterior or empirical influence (that is, free will understood as "uncaused cause").

On the other side, Hegel's "inferior faculty of desire" can be specially be subject for experiment and observation; for instance, that the prefrontal cortex is responsible of such "human intellectual traits" as "*judgement, foresight, a sense of purpose, a sense of*

*responsibility* and a sense of *social propriety*" (Haines, 2002, 518) is a widely accepted fact in contemporary Neurobiology. This is a concrete point in which Hegelian Philosophy and Neurobiology could come together to render some applicable results on Neuroethics and Philosophy of Right; indeed, if free will, and concomitantly teleological (even if on a finite level) behavior is inherent and essential to man, and if this trait is the philosophical basis for right and jurisprudence, then, a clinical case, with impaired teleological activity due to some physiological abnormality (produced by genetics, tumors, infections, etc.) in the structures<sup>30</sup> which are (to our present knowledge) conditions *sine qua non* for "executive function"<sup>31</sup> should, in a strong normative sense, be susceptible to particular juridical treatment, as that which make man *human*, that is *free will*, would be missing, in some way or extent; to state it briefly, a human being with limited teleological capacity should be, concomitantly, a subject with limited juridical capacity. The special juridical treatment of children and the mentally ill or impaired is philosophically justified in a strong and empirically verifiable way.

Concerning the Hegelian "superior faculty of desire" the task may not be so easy as in the "my brain, my action, my responsibility" case stated above; let us just, in a challenging brief way, state that a "left lateral prefrontal glioblastoma" case described by Knight and D'Esposito resulting in impaired social capacity,<sup>32</sup> could, in a global sense, just be judged in view of the "really free will" invoked by Hegel on the question of the *superior* use of our teleological capacity; indeed, the thesis that being part of a social community, in a functional as well as "healthy" way, is desirable in and of itself, is something that could scarcely be accepted philosophically without an ontological background such as the one in the theory of the free will of the author of the *Philosophy of Right*. Again, one may have a complete account of the functioning of the whole brain circuitry at the genetic, anatomical and electrochemical level, and yet find no glimpse of *rights, the moral good, economic capital, and political sovereignty*.

Finally, the question for the freedom of the will, which occupied modern philosophers such as Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes and Kant in an intensive way, received in Hegel a

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30. Drubach *et al.* speak of "the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPF) and the ACC [anterior cingulated cortex] "as brain areas "most frequently implicated in control of executive behavior" (Drubach *et al.*, 2011, 245).

31. Knight and D' Esposito define "executive function" as "a wide range of cognitive processes such as focused and sustained attention, fluency and flexibility of thought in the generation of solutions to novel problems, and planning and regulating adaptive and goal-directed behavior" (Knight and D' Esposito, 2003, 259).

32. "[W.R.] was unable to carry out the activities necessary to make him a fully functioning member of society" (Knight and D' Esposito, 2003, 261).

radical reorientation: it is not after an “uncaused cause” which we should look or yearn for, in order to feel and think ourselves as *free*; rather the very same material-biological reality, and, as such, thoroughly submitted to causality, leads us *necessarily* to conclude that we, as human beings, are not given entities submitted to the fate of the execution of a genetic or algorithmic program; on the contrary, we make ourselves, as individuals and collectives, something *other* than that which our DNA dictates (that is: survival, in a general sense). To this self-production, self-assertion, eventual self-recognition of man through man, and definition of the *essential* in him Hegel calls *free will*.

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