Personal Freedom and Its Discontents:
Hegel on the Ethical Basis of Modern Skepticism

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Can an error be rational? Hegel traces modern skepticism to the mistaken idea that the object of knowledge is ontologically separate from our rational, subjective minds. Once we subscribe to this idea—which John McDowell has called “the basic misconception of modern philosophy”—we can only represent reality as it appears to us, as subjects, rather than know it in-itself, as it is independently of us. However, and contrary to McDowell and other prominent commentators, I argue that Hegel takes this mistake to be *ethically rational*; it is grounded in basic and enduring features of the modern socio-political order, features that are necessary for individual freedom and for economic and cultural development. And yet, while it is neither possible nor desirable to *eliminate* modern skepticism, I argue that Hegel’s social theory offers ethical arrangements that are meant to *mitigate* its potentially nihilistic effects. I reconstruct his account of the modern (nuclear) family as a case of what I call an “ethical remedy” to skepticism.
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Abbreviations

PhR: Elements of the Philosophy of Right

LHP: Lectures on the History of Philosophy

PhG: Phenomenology of Spirit

E2: Philosophy of Nature

E3: Philosophy of Mind

RSP: On the Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy

* A note on translation: I mostly follow the English renderings I cite. When I modify the translation is it based on Hegel (1969-1971). Werke [in 20 Bänden]. Suhrkamp. I don’t, however, always note modifications—only when I find them philosophically significant.
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Introduction

The supreme achievement of the person is to support this contradiction, which nothing in the natural realm contains or could endure. (PhR §35Z)

The positive truth of sense certainty is that every consciousness is absolutely certain that it is, and that there are other real things outside of it, and that in its natural being it, like these things, is in and for itself or absolute. (PhG ¶558)

Personhood is an achievement, and modern personhood is a tremendous achievement, or rather—an ongoing task. This statement, at least its first part, may strike the reader as awkward, a categorical mistake of sorts. Persons seem to be a natural fact, similar in this respect to rocks, trees and oceans. To say that personhood is an achievement is akin to saying that an ocean is a triumph. After all, the notion of achievement presupposes the possibility of failure. Can a person, then, fail to be a person? If not, the concept of achievement doesn’t seem to apply.

Hegel would argue, however, that the answer is positive, at least if we reformulate the question. Being a person doesn’t only consist in having the natural features that human beings naturally have.¹ In Hegel’s lingo, personhood is not an “immediate” fact. Personhood denotes, first and foremost, a sort of authority—which is earned and could also be lost. The fundamental problem of personhood

¹ Hegel (1969 7, 94), in his notes on PhR §35, under the title Was heißt Person?, writes: “Person und Subjekt sind verschieden—subject auch individuum.”
concerns one’s success—or failure—to exercise authority over his determinations (or properties, *Bestimmungen*), unifying them all as *his* determinations. The first “his” in the previous sentence denotes an “immediate” or natural relation. In this sense, a slave’s body is his; indeed, he was born this way. The second “his” denotes a normative or a mediated relation—a mediation exercised by a person in the act of avowing his (immediate) property. In this second sense, the slave’s body is not his, or at least not sufficiently his. The slave is not a (full-fledged) person. Hegel’s writing is rich with examples of human beings who fail the challenge of personhood. In the Encyclopedic Anthropology, for example, he describes a range of mental pathologies that prevent their patients from exercising sufficient and enduring authority over their body and thoughts (E3 §406). But, failures of personhood are not limited to the abnormal. We all fail this task at times. Ordinary life keeps determining us in great many ways—in the actions it prompts or sometimes forces us to perform, in representations it presents us with—and it is an ongoing task to own these determinations rather than “go with the flow”, so to speak, in an indifferent and alienated manner. Personhood, then, is not a final or ultimate achievement; it is the achievement of keeping with the task, of not giving up despite the inevitable flops and setbacks.

If personhood is an achievement then modern personhood is a tremendous achievement. For at least two reasons, it is much more difficult to be a person nowadays. First, the range of determinations that a modern person is expected to own is much larger and more dynamic. A peasant in a medieval village had, in comparison, a monotonic life. He would mostly see the same people and sights and
perform routine actions and gestures. Now imagine a resident of a modern day metropolis—the overwhelming wealth of occurrences, the pressure in her work place, devices conveying news from distant places. It is hard to take it all in, let alone form opinions about it. The problem, moreover—and this is the second reason why it’s harder for the modern person—is that it’s no longer clear on what grounds one is to own one’s (immediate) determinations. The medieval peasant presumably had a clear and determinate image of himself, say as a peasant, a Christian, a husband, a father. Such concepts entail a range of actions and beliefs that someone falling under them should perform or entertain. The peasant, in other words, identified with a set of norms that articulated how he was to determine himself, norms that guided the authority he exercised over his body and thoughts. The modern person, rather, lacks such a clear set of norms. Faced with the shock of modern reality, and without proper guidance, he is occasionally lost—even to the point of despair.

This dissertation explores Hegel’s conception of modern personhood. Contrary to my somewhat bleak opening, it stresses the freedom and power it is coupled with. In fact, it takes this freedom—which I call modern personal freedom—to be the grounding principle of other facets of modern personhood. It is because the modern person is committed to utter normative independence that he defies the authority of universal or shared norms. Having said that, the dissertation also examines Hegel’s way to address the problems that this defiance gives rise to—indeed, the looming threat of despair; what I call (in Chapter III) nihilism.

And yet, this is not a typical study of Hegel’s understanding of the modern individual. While it offers an account of the modern person—including its place
within the modern ethical order or Sittlichkeit—the point is to show how modern personhood grounds or explains a theoretical outlook, namely, modern skepticism, which is bound, in turn, with scientific naturalism. Once we have a clear idea of what modern personhood consists in—the kind of ongoing task that it denotes—we will see how modern skepticism is a necessary aspect thereof. However, once we relate the ethical and the theoretical—modern personhood and modern skepticism—it becomes all the more difficult to differentiate them. Modern skepticism, even while being expressed in philosophy books, is also an ethical phenomenon, informing the self-conception and attitudes of ordinary individuals. As such, it has ethical implications—the aforementioned threat of nihilism is chief among them—and it calls for a range of ethical remedies in order to mitigate its negative effects.

In such a study—which seeks to relate the ethical and the theoretical—it is often hard to decide on which side to begin. This is also reflected in the current Introduction. While I began with a brief reflection on modern personhood as an ethical phenomenon, the next section will focus on the philosophical outlook, suggesting that an adequate account of modern skepticism should juxtapose it against its ethical conditions. The following three sections address the very relationship between the ethical and the theoretical. I distinguish my approach from a range of other treatments of this topic and respond to a possible objection. In the last section I offer an outline of the dissertation’s four chapters.
Modern Skepticism and Personal Freedom

Opening the chapter on Descartes in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel declares the French philosopher “the initiator of philosophy in the modern era.” While conferring this title on Descartes is hardly an original gesture—and, indeed, could be repeated by any number of philosophical novices—Hegel’s reasons for it are more interesting. Descartes is the father of modern philosophy since for him, Hegel says, “it is the interest of freedom that is the foundation. Whatever is recognized as true must present itself in such a way that our freedom is preserved in the fact that we think” (LHP 109).

Placing freedom at the foundation of Descartes’s project is no doubt a surprising move. If anything, freedom appears to be an *interference* within Descartes’ epistemic inquiry, a potential source of *error*. It is our free will which makes us, humans, often assent to ideas which are not “clear and distinct,” thereby tempts us to err and keeps us away from the truth. Hegel admits that Descartes would have rejected his interpretation, or at least the terms he uses. Descartes’ own argument, he says, does not stress “the principle of freedom as such” but appeals to “reasons more popular in tone,” namely, the need for epistemic certainty. The question, then, is why, for Hegel, it is *freedom* that is the foundation of modern epistemology, of which Descartes, he says, was the initiator.

The issue, indeed, is not only Descartes but a broader philosophical outlook, what Hegel called, in one of his early essays, *modern skepticism*. This skepticism proceeds from the presupposition that there is “an ontological and epistemological
John McDowell, who formulated this characterization in *Mind and World*, was echoing Hegel, who, in his opening remarks on modern philosophy, argues: “thinking at this stage arises essentially as something subjective in such a way that it has an antithesis in being in general” (LHP 107).

Both Hegel and McDowell believe that this presupposition is a mistake. McDowell has called it “the visibly dubious assumption” or even the “basic misconception of modern philosophy.” ³ Hegel, in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, claims that it betrays a “fear of the truth” (PhG ¶74). This “dubious assumption” dooms modern philosophy to recurrent skepticism. If what we conceptually represent falls short of reality—just because it belongs to a realm which we assume is ontologically different from the reality we seek to know—then skepticism is the natural implication. We can cite a metaphor proposed by Gottlob Ernst Schulze, whom Hegel takes to be a typical exemplar of modern skepticism: knowing requires building a bridge between our concepts and reality, but since we only have our concepts as building blocks, we are destined to remain on our side of the river (RSP 317).

However, there is a crucial and telling difference in the way in which Hegel and McDowell approach this mistake and its skeptical consequences. For McDowell, the mistaken presupposition of modern epistemology expresses “philosophical anxieties”, the result of the modern scientific success in disenchanting nature. Once

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³ McDowell (1998), 888n, 889.
science is able to explain the transactions between our body and other natural entities as part of the "realm of law", reasons are confined to the conceptual—and merely subjective—realm. In response, McDowell recommends a return to an ordinary or immediate approach to the world, in which we do and should cite facts as reasons for our knowledge-claims.⁴

But for Hegel, I will argue, the fundamental mistake of modern epistemology is not the result of a merely philosophical anxiety, oblivion of a pre-philosophical ordinary standpoint; it is, rather, grounded in the conditions of ordinary life in modernity. Or more precisely: it is the result of developments in the self-conception of modern ordinary individuals. Modern individuals, in Hegel’s diagnosis, increasingly subscribe to a definite conception of freedom I deem modern personal freedom. As such, they take themselves to have utter normative independence. Therefore, they can only represent the world as devoid of reasons or rational connections, for otherwise they would have to acknowledge that the world places them under normative constraints, namely, as having reasons to determine themselves (to action or belief) in one way rather than another. It is freedom in this sense, it seems, which stands at the foundation of Descartes’s epistemic enquiry. Descartes’ aversion to any presuppositions in his epistemic inquiry reflects his effort to avoid any compromise of his normative independence.

This dissertation, then, takes the basic mistake of modern epistemology seriously—not only because it offers an explanation for it. McDowell does this too (even if it is not in the center of his project). This dissertation takes the mistake

⁴ This paragraph is a gloss on McDowell (1996) as a whole. See, for example, §2 and §8 of the Introduction.
seriously since it reveals it as a necessary or, moreover, a *rational* mistake. It is rational since the conception of freedom that grounds it has necessary functions within modern *Sittlichkeit* and specifically within civil society, the sphere of the market economy. Insofar as modern personal freedom is conducive to the accumulation of wealth and cultural progress, then it is rationally necessary, including the mistakes it is bound up with. In this respect, my argument points in a markedly different direction than Charles Taylor’s hopes for “overcoming epistemology”. While I follow Taylor’s spirit in relating features of modern epistemology to modern subjectivity more broadly, my argument suggests that the prospects of overcoming the former (much as the latter, for that matter) are neither bright nor desirable.

**Between Social Philosophy and Epistemology**

From a social philosophical perspective, this dissertation fits into the growing interest in Hegel’s account of modern individuality, its pathologies and the remedy that Ethical Life is supposed to deliver. Commentators in the last two decades—such as Allen Wood, Michael Hardimon, Frederick Neuhouser and Axel Honneth—have emphasized the interests of the individual, challenging a common perception according to which Hegel subjects individual freedom to the interests of the

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6 I believe that the different conclusions lie in the fact that I—following Hegel—give more weight and attention to the ways in which a certain image of the modern subject (what I call modern personal freedom) *fits into and plays constructive roles* within the modern ethical order—even as this very image often entails a *dismissal* of social institutions. Taylor, on the other hand, tends to treat the modern subject in relative isolation, a tendency which reflects, I believe, too easy a compliance with the modern subject’s own image of himself.
collective or Spirit. But this literature remains, by and large, within the ethical or political parts of Hegel’s thought. Ethical Life is presented as a social solution to the modern predicament of limited freedom or individual alienation. This dissertation focuses, rather, on the epistemological consequences of such ethical problems.

In the more theoretical compartments of analytic philosophy, like epistemology and philosophy of mind, the last decade or two have seen a Hegelian Turn of sorts. John McDowell, Robert Brandom, and Sebastian Rödl—drawing on Wilfrid Sellars’s insights—employ Hegel in developing a sophisticated and historically informed critique of modern epistemology, that proved to be a forceful tool in showing the common stakes in diverse epistemological accounts, from Descartes or the British empiricists, through Kant, to the logical positivists or Davidson. However, appreciating Hegel’s critique of modern epistemology, and even his own considered account of knowledge (as an alternative to typically modern mistakes), does little to explain why the modern epistemological picture has held such force on the philosophical imagination. If, as I argue in this dissertation, this picture is grounded in enduring features of the modern ethical order, then its explanation is not just a curious historical pursuit—an attempt to understand something we can easily do or have already done away with, a mere “philosophical anxiety” in McDowell’s terms—but a pressing intellectual task.

Hegel’s critique of modern epistemology has given rise to yet another—and

9 Following Bristow (2005), I believe that the task of philosophical critique goes beyond exposing a mistake as such; it should also make us understand why the mistake is so attractive to us.
third—strand in the literature, namely, a focus on his debt to ancient—rather than modern—skepticism. The modern skeptic typically proceeds from the certainty of knowing our own minds, and raises doubts about the ability to know what allegedly lies “outside” or beyond them. Hegel dismisses this problematic, as it uncritically proceeds from the paradigmatic mistake of modern epistemology, the separation of subject and object. And yet, this dissertation takes modern skepticism as central to Hegel’s system—not because it has special philosophical merits, but rather because it is a widespread view in modernity. It is a view which ordinary people implicitly or explicitly uphold, that underlies their attitudes to their own knowledge and action, and that is constituted by specifically modern ethical conditions.

Therefore, this dissertation brings recent work done on Hegel’s ethics and political philosophy to bear on his construal of modern epistemology. It proceeds from the starting point of the former but has a different concern in focus, namely, how modern personhood—understood as a certain conception of freedom, of what it means for one to realize oneself—generates mistaken conceptions of knowledge.

Since this study seeks to highlight a relation—a grounding or explanatory relation—between the practical and theoretical parts of Hegel’s system, it offers a gloss on a familiar theme in Hegel in particular and in German Idealism in general, namely, the primacy of freedom to knowledge. The next section distinguishes my approach to this theme from a prevalent line of interpretation.

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10 See, for example, Forster (1989), Franks (2005), Westphal (2003), Bristow (2005), and Viewegg (1999, 2005).
The Primacy of Freedom

In 1796 or 1797, a brief manifesto-like fragment was composed in Tübingen, where Hegel was studying with two friends and collaborators, Hölderlin and Schelling. Drafted in Hegel’s handwriting, it’s not clear who was the author of the text, but its spirit, if not the letter, expressed sentiments shared by all the “Tübingen Three.” The text begins thus:

An Ethics. Since all metaphysics will henceforth fall into morals—for which Kant, with both of his practical postulates has given only an example and exhausted nothing, so this ethics will contain nothing other than a complete system of all ideas, or what is the same, of all practical postulates. The first idea is naturally the conception of my self as an absolutely free being. Along with the free, self-conscious being an entire world emerges simultaneously—out of nothingness—the only true and conceivable creation out of nothingness—Here I will descend to the fields of physics; the question is this: How should a world be constituted for a moral being?11

Franz Rosenzweig has called the fragment das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismum—a fitting title for a text starting off with a fundamental theme of German Idealism, namely, the primacy of freedom. To be sure, as the author concedes, it was Kant who introduced this theme, having derived his metaphysics from the notion of a self-constituting subject. Kant, however, “exhausted nothing” [nichts erschöpft hat], and one can read the advent of German Idealism as an extended attempt to take this promise further.

This trope—the primacy of freedom—is hard to swallow, even (or especially)

11 The text is available online, e.g., on zeno.org.
more than two centuries later. We are ordinarily used to thinking of cognition as an utterly passive and receptive faculty—the business of representing the world as it is independently of our knowing it. In cognizing the world, we try to minimize or altogether avoid infecting our image of it with our subjective interests or biases. Still, for various reasons (some of them alluded to below), the German Idealists were determined to ground cognition in our self-conception as free and rational. While the notion of the primacy of freedom lends itself to multiple interpretations, I would like to motivate my own approach by distinguishing it from one, indeed dominant, interpretation (or family of interpretations).

In her *Constructions of Reason*, Onora O’Neill argues that Kant is committed to the claim that “the Categorical Imperative is the supreme principle of reason” in general, namely, not only of practical reason.\(^{12}\) She draws attention to a series of metaphors that organize the argument in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For Kant, the task of theoretical reason consists in construction—constructing what Descartes has called *l’édifice du savoir* from the discrete facts collected by our senses (or other means). Unlike Descartes, the traditional rationalist, Kant rejects the notion that the blueprint for this construction—the rules that the constructors are to follow—is “out there,” waiting to be discovered, so to speak. This, after all, would be at odds with the subject’s autonomy, insofar as it would place her under rules that not she herself authored. Rather, the construction is autonomous in the sense that it proceeds according to rules that the community of constructors—or each of the constructors—would accept upon reflection. In other words, the principle of

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\(^{12}\) O’Neill (1989), 4-5.
theoretical reason is a *practical* principle, the principle that demands that we act (and in this case—arrange information) only on a law that could be a universal law. This principle is the Categorical Imperative.\textsuperscript{13}

O’Neill’s argument centers on what we may call the *arrangement* of facts, rather than on the facts themselves. The Categorical Imperative goes (or ought to go) into effect not at the moment when a subject takes in content from the world (thereby represents a fact), but when such impressions are organized as to constitute a body of knowledge or scientific knowledge, call it a *theory*. Importantly, we can assume that there are numerous sets of rules that would comply with the Categorical Imperative. Although O’Neill does not develop this point, it seems that these rules would vary depending on the socio-historical context of the community of knowers. The same fact provided by an individual knower—or a group of knowers—e.g., that the sun is in a definite distance from the earth—would fit into different cosmological theories, and this, in turn, is contingent on the facts provided by other knowers and on their practical, moral and religious interests.

According to O’Neill, then, freedom is primary to knowledge in the following sense. Even if knowledge is constructed by bits of content that we passively take in, the *construction* of these bits is a norm-governed and collective activity. We do not perceive the plan for construction but rather compose it ourselves, as it were. This plan is practical since it (1) complies with the Categorical Imperative, open to critique by any rational knower; and, I would add, (2) shaped by extra-theoretical factors.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 23.
A number of Hegel (and Kant) commentators locate the primacy of freedom in a more fundamental level—not in the construction of theories but rather in the synthesis of facts. Thus, a fact is not the product of a merely passive sensitivity. In order to represent a fact, a subject must connect together different moments of her experience. The question arises, according to which rule? For example, if I see a patch of crimson at t₁ and a patch of scarlet at t₂, am I representing two different facts (and, perhaps, the fact of the change) or only one (since scarlet and crimson are both shades of red). One could say, it is contingent on physiological, mechanic processes. But such a construal of the situation strips the cognizer of any responsibility; she is depicted as a passive vessel, causally affected by the world without the ability to stand behind her knowledge-claims and draw on the rational connections between them. In response to a subject claiming, “I see red”, one could prod, “but you only see scarlet and crimson.” A rational, epistemically responsible subject could retort: “but scarlet and crimson are red”, thereby justifying her initial knowledge-claim by citing a reason. She would thereby acknowledge her commitment to a conceptual norm, a norm that articulates the connection between the concept ‘red’ and two other concepts. To be sure—and to use an analogy proposed by McDowell—even a non-rational subject could make this point, but in that case, the conceptual relations would not be the reason for the knowledge-claim. It would be analogous to a subject who finds himself in a distant village, explaining his presence there by appealing to a passing tornado. In McDowell’s parlance, this would only exculpate his presence in the village, rather than justify it; it would not
express an authority with respect to his movement. What differentiates knowledge and action from passive reactions to the world is that it is the business of free subjects, in the sense that they determine themselves by way of acknowledging definite norms as their norms—namely, in the sense that they are autonomous. This notion doesn’t only hold (as in O’Neill’s emphasis) in the arrangement of facts but, more fundamentally, in the way facts are synthesized by applying conceptual norms.

Commentators such as McDowell, Brandom or Bristow attribute this basic insight to Kant. As in the practical sphere, a free rational subject can only act on norms that she recognizes as valid. Therefore, the subject must be able, at least in principle, consciously endorse the rules according to which she synthesizes the manifold of content received by her senses. Freedom, then, is prior to knowledge in the sense that cognition is a norm-governed activity, whose character is grounded in the subject’s autonomy.

Now, how does Hegel fit into this story? Brandom argues that Hegel solves a crucial problem in Kant, sometimes referred to as the paradox of autonomy. If a subject is autonomous insofar as she is bound only by rules to which she binds herself, the question arises, in what sense is she even bound to a rule? As the author of the rule, she can change it whenever she wants, as it were. Hegel solves the problem by locating subjective autonomy in a social context. An individual subject binds herself to a rule, but what follows from it—the meaning of the rule—is not in

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14 See McDowell (1996), 8n.
16 I follow Brandom (1998), 50ff, and Brandom (1979), 193. Pippin (2009), 192, and Pinkard (2002), 226, suggest that the need to solve the Kantian paradox was an animating force of German Idealism. Rödl (2007), 116, argues that it’s a pseudo problem that didn’t bother Kant. I say more about it in Chapter I.
her discretion but determined by other subjects according to norms shared by the community. For example, the subject claims, “I see red”. It is up to her to make (or not to make) this point, but what is not up to her is what follows from it, e.g., that she also sees a color. To use Brandom’s analogy, the subject is free to make various moves in the game, but the rules of the game are interpreted by the community of players. It is only in relation to others that the rules that mediate the individual subject’s autonomy become determinate. If autonomy grounds cognition, and autonomy, in turn, requires a concrete social context, then the primacy of freedom becomes the primacy of ethics. Thus, cognition is a norm-governed activity whose norms are determined within a social setting in which multiple subjects are mutually committed to norms and hold each other responsible for correctly applying these norms. This, very roughly, is the interpretation of the primacy of freedom to knowledge—for Hegel as appropriating Kant’s basic insight—within a dominant strand in the literature.17

Moving now to my own approach, it might be helpful to distinguish two ways in which the interpretation I so far discussed can be understood—metaphysical and theoretical. Metaphysically, it could be understood as a claim about reality. Human subjects are autonomous (and, moreover, their autonomy must be embedded in a social setting) and, correspondingly, human cognition is grounded in this notion of autonomy. Theoretically, the primacy of freedom could be understood not as a claim about reality but, rather, about the logical connection between two theories about reality. Thus, given that we conceive of (the reality of) freedom as autonomy, we are

17 See also Descombe (2014), 295-313; Taylor (1985), 36-38, and Taylor (1975), 382.
committed to *conceive of* (the reality of) knowledge in a corresponding manner. The second, theoretical construal is obviously much weaker than the metaphysical construal. It amounts to rejecting (or at least doubting) the premise of the metaphysical construal (that human freedom *is* so and so) while still accepting that, insofar as on *does* subscribe to this premise, one is committed (perhaps in conjunction with other premises) to a definite conception of knowledge.

To see the distinction more clearly, we can look at Susan Neiman’s gloss on Kant’s revolutionary conception of reason. Unlike his rationalist predecessors (and specifically Leibniz), Kant rejects the notion that reason is primarily a purposive order of the universe, and only secondarily a subjective faculty that allows us to intuit this order. This, as we saw, would be at odds with his commitment to subjective autonomy, for it would mean that subjects are committed to external purposes they did not pose themselves. Neiman argues that, in order to avoid this, Kant posits a sphere of reality that is *not* purposive but merely causal—namely, the sphere of nature—which we are to know by revealing lawful causal connections.\(^\text{18}\)

Regardless of what we think about Kant’s commitment to autonomy, we can still appreciate the consistency that the relationship between his conception of freedom and conception of knowledge reveals. In other words, we can appreciate the *theoretical* primacy of freedom that his system exhibits, even if, *metaphysically* speaking, we don’t buy into it.

Having this distinction in place, my approach in this dissertation can be put as follows. I am interested in making explicit the primacy of freedom, *construed*

\(^{18}\) Neiman (1994), Introduction and Ch. 1, especially 5, 33, 37-38. I revisit Neiman’s claim in Chapter III.
theoretically, with respect to typically modern conceptions of freedom and knowledge. Specifically, I will argue that, for Hegel, there is a necessary connection between the conception of freedom I call “modern personal freedom” and modern skepticism. This is a theoretical and not a metaphysical construal of the primacy of freedom for the simple reason that Hegel himself considers personal freedom a mistaken view. Yet, insofar as this conception of freedom is prevalent in the modern West, it nonetheless explains another mistake, namely, modern skepticism.

However, this is not—or not primarily—an exercise in philosophical interpretation of the sort Susan Neiman pursues with respect to Kant. Rather than focusing on philosophical accounts of freedom, I rather explicate what Hegel takes to be an ordinary conception of freedom in modernity. It is an ordinary conception in the sense that ordinary individuals—not necessarily philosophically initiated—are explicitly or implicitly committed to it. My account, then, neither endorses this (ordinary) conception of freedom, nor suggests that Hegel endorses it. However, I do suggest that, for Hegel, given basic features of the modern ethical order, this conception of freedom is bound to remain an important part of the self-conception of ordinary individuals.

**Moral and Social Freedom?**

This study may encounter an immediate objection, which I’d like to address upfront. My notion of modern personal freedom is largely based on the first chapter of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, Abstract Right. According to this chapter, freedom consists in exercising authority without answering to any higher norm. The ground
for my owning a certain range of properties—for realizing my personhood—is simply the fact that I so will. I have no obligation to justify these exercises of my will in reference to norms, i.e., by citing reasons. In the modern ethical order, this conception of freedom has its proper place in civil society. Within this sphere, there is an array of actions with respect to which we take ourselves to have absolute authority—to the extent that they don’t require justification. Thus, there is no expectation that I justify my choice to become a doctor, buy a new house, or marry a certain gentleman.

However, the lives of modern individuals are far too complex to be reduced to this conception of freedom. While I need not justify my choice to buy a house to strangers—fellow members of civil society—I may very well be expected to offer such a justification to my husband. Moreover, even when strangers are concerned, we often cite shared norms as justification for our actions. This is definitely the case when we engage in politics, not necessarily as professional politicians. As a citizen participating in public deliberation, I often justify my interventions by appealing to ideas about the collective good. Finally, even when the economic sphere is concerned, personal freedom (as I define it) is just one side of the story. Employers would often justify their actions to their employees, and businessmen would argue that they engage in certain ventures since it serves the good of society as a whole. For Hegel, the economic sphere is not only a place in which we exercise our authority in promoting personal goals; it is also a space where we hope to win “honor” [Ehre] or esteem (PhR §207). And we enjoy esteem only if our exercises of freedom can be shown to realize common ideals. Accordingly, modern individuals
don’t only conceive of themselves in terms of personal freedom—as having the absolute authority to determine themselves without heed to others—but also in terms of two other conceptions, often called moral and social freedom.\textsuperscript{19}

Why, then, am I giving this pride of place to personal freedom, to the degree that I argue that it explains key features of modern philosophy?

In response to this legitimate objection, I can first appeal to a trivial—even if always disappointing—constraint. One has to focus. And this is the focus I have chosen. But I do have a reason for this choice. My sense is that personal freedom is more dominant in the self-conception of modern individuals than Hegel would have wanted it to be, and that in the two centuries since Hegel’s departure, this dominance has entrenched itself. This means, \textit{inter alia}, that attitudes whose proper place is civil society find their way into cordial, familial and political relationships. If marriage is not conceived as an unconditional bond—a sphere where we change with and in relation to our partner—but as conditioned on career moves, even as a way to show off economic success, then marriage becomes an extension of civil society, subject to the logic of personal freedom. If citizens refuse to discuss their political opinions or vote, rather treating it as a “personal choice”—perhaps because they don’t recognize a shared set of norms with fellow citizens—then they exercise personal—rather than social or moral—freedom.\textsuperscript{20}

In light of this predicament, I believe that there’s a point in a philosophical

\textsuperscript{19} In the course of the dissertation I say a bit more about these alternative conceptions, but only insofar as I find it helpful or necessary in clarifying my interpretation of personal freedom.

\textsuperscript{20} I am not going to argue for this claim (let alone it’s partly empirical). It only serves as a motivating reason for my argument. I have found ample support for it in Axel Honneth’s work, e.g., (2014), 86-94, where he highlights “the process of legal codification, which began to take hold of the family, schools, leisure time and culture in the 1960’s” or in Eva Illuz’s work on “emotional capitalism” (2007).
attempt to *isolate* personal freedom, as it were. I hope to reveal some of the reasons why personal freedom—as an image of what the human, or human freedom, is—exercises so much power over the modern imagination, and how it explains other images—of nature or of society—which exert similar power. Even if at times, and for reasons of simplicity, I over generalize—making claims about “the modern individual” as such—I don’t mean to suggest that modern individuality can be reduced to personal freedom. And yet, modern individuals have a curious tendency to reduce *themselves* to this image. This dissertation attempts to understand why.

**Dissertation Outline**

In its effort to reveal an explanatory link between modern personal freedom and modern skepticism, this dissertation centers on two parts of Hegel’s *oeuvre* in particular. The first was already mentioned, namely, Abstract Right—the first chapter of the *Philosophy of Right*—and Hegel’s account of modern civil society in the third chapter, Ethical Life. The second is the first chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Sense Certainty, since I believe—and the dissertation sets to show—that it captures a typically modern conception of reality and knowledge, a conception that necessarily leads to skepticism.

**Chapter I** is preparatory in the sense that it doesn’t yet address the idea of personal freedom, nor specifically modern ethical conditions. Rather, it aims to show why Sense Certainty is even relevant to my argument later in the dissertation. In Sense Certainty, Hegel critiques a naïve or “natural” conception of knowledge, according to which we are to remain utterly receptive to the object of knowledge.
One could follow Hegel’s dialectic without considering the ethical context of the knowing subject. In fact, the knowing subject as Hegel considers her there is abstracted from any social, political or historical context. However, my argument in this chapter aims to challenge this common perception (and interpretation) of Sense Certainty. Drawing on an account of the *Phenomenology* as a whole—as a project of *Bildung* directed at Hegel’s modern readers—I suggest that sense certainty must bear special relevance for us, moderns, lest we’ll have difficulties to get on board the pedagogical process that Hegel has designed for us. The chapter, then, makes a first step towards showing the ethical stakes in Sense Certainty. To this end, I move to the third volume of the Encyclopedia, the *Philosophy of Spirit*. The latter contains an abbreviated version of the 1806 *Phenomenology*, which is conveniently preceded by a long chapter deemed the Anthropology. Conveniently, since it allows us to trace the ethical preconditions of Sense Certainty (and the phenomenological standpoint more broadly). In the Anthropology, the human subject is considered as exhibiting a “unity” *[Einheit]* with her species *[Gattung]* or form of life. As such, her determinations are governed by the peculiar norms of her life-form. But the human subject, unlike other organisms, is such that she must assert her independence from her life-form, including from the norms that govern and structure her representation of the world. The result is the conception of knowledge discussed in Sense Certainty: the subject takes knowledge to be totally receptive and passive since if knowing were active—if it were mediated by subjective activity—then it

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21 Here and elsewhere I capitalize “Sense Certainty” when I refer to the chapter, and don’t capitalize “sense certainty” when I refer to the shape of consciousness this chapter is about. The same applies to the distinction between “Consciousness” (the first part of the Phenomenology) and “consciousness” as a concept.
were governed by the norms of the subject's life-form, precisely those which she asserts her independence from. Therefore, and contrary to appearances, Sense Certainty does have an ethical context, namely, the knowing subject's form of life. It is the subject's striving to be normatively independent of her form of life that explains her receptive and passive conception of knowledge.

However, the connection that Chapter I reveals—between the subject's normative independence and sense certainty—is a claim about human beings in general; it's not yet a claim specific to modernity. By explicating Hegel's notion of modern personal freedom, Chapter II argues that the latter is an intensification of the natural striving to normative independence. Personal freedom explains, in turn, a conception of reality and knowledge that is similar, in key respects, to sense certainty. Since the person conceives of herself as independent of any life form (and hence of its conceptual norms), she represents the world as non-conceptual. By way of reading key moments in Sense Certainty, I argue that this conception of reality necessarily leads to skepticism about the very possibility to know. For modern persons, however, the natural striving to independence—which characterizes any human being—becomes a commitment, one to which they are willing to stick despite skeptical setbacks. In the Enlightenment chapter of the Phenomenology, Hegel depicts the subject of the time as (what I call) a "self confident sense certainty"—a subject who is "absolutely certain" about her naturalistic image of reality. This confidence, I argue, is grounded in modern personal freedom.

In drawing out the skeptical implications of personal freedom, Chapter II elaborates an ordinary skeptical standpoint, namely, a skepticism that informs the
lives of people who are not necessarily philosophers. **Chapter III** connects this ordinary standpoint to modern skepticism considered as a *philosophical* outlook, a peculiarly modern hybrid of metaphysical skepticism and naturalistic dogmatism. Drawing on Paul Franks, I argue that the two features that define modern philosophical skepticism—subject-related foundationalism and scientific naturalism—serve the realization of personal freedom; hence are grounded in the conditions of modern civil society. Insofar as the modern person sticks to her normative independence, she doubts the ability to justify knowledge in terms of an absolute purposive principle—in the manner of traditional metaphysics—for such a principle would compromise her authority. Absent such a principle, she conceives of knowledge as ultimately based on brute matters of fact [*Tatsachen*], namely, on what *appears* to her as real. The method of the natural sciences is used, in turn, to account for the differences in how reality strikes different subjects. Building on this method, then, the modern skeptic can offer the modern person an image of reality that can serve as an object for his freedom *without* compromising the person's absolute normative authority. In order to clarify my claim about modernity, I elaborate a similar explanatory axis between freedom in the Roman context and a specific variety of ancient skepticism, the one associated with Agrippa. Finally, Chapter III also details some of the *ethical* implications of modern skepticism, revolving around (what I call) “the threat of nihilism”. Since the modern person—given her conception of freedom—is resistant to epistemic and moral justifications that could lend her worldview cohesion and grounding, she is in a constant danger of experiencing both her subjective agency and social norms as arbitrary and alienating.
**Chapter IV** locates modern skepticism within Hegel’s theory of modern civil society. I argue, on the one hand, that personal freedom is not only inevitable but also fulfills necessary ethical functions within modern *Sittchkeit*. Therefore, modern skepticism—as a philosophical outlook that supports it—is no less necessary. However, Hegel wants to counter the ethical ills discussed in the end of Chapter III, so that modern skepticism—necessary as it may be—would not transpire in nihilism. I discuss a few ethical arrangements, both in civil society and in the nuclear family, that are meant to give the modern person the grounding and purpose that he lacks as long as he is an isolated economic player. Such measures, I argue, are not supposed to *eliminate* skepticism—that would be both impossible and undesirable—but only to tamper its negative aspects.
Chapter I

“The Truth of Consciousness is Self-Consciousness”:
Towards an Ethical Account of Sense Certainty

At first glance, at least, Sense Certainty—the first chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—is not the place to seek insight into the topic of this dissertation, namely, the epistemological aspects of modern personal freedom. After all, references to freedom—or, for the matter, other ethical or practical concepts—are almost totally absent from the text. Sense Certainty—like the next two chapters of the Phenomenology, all grouped under Part I: Consciousness—recounts the experience of a subject (deemed “consciousness”) who takes himself to be utterly abstracted from any social or historical context; no other subjects are mentioned, nor social or cultural institutions. Furthermore, given the way this subject conceives of knowledge (and the reality to be known), such a context doesn’t seem to be relevant. For sensuous consciousness, cognition is the business of taking in content without any subjective intervention, or to put it differently—of representing the object without modifying it (e.g., by arranging content according to conceptual norms). If this is the nature of knowledge, then social context can indeed be ignored. *Any* subject—in *any* context—would be able to know. She is simply to open her eyes to the world, as it were. It appears, then, that neither ethics nor history is relevant for understanding this part of Hegel’s system.
Drawing on the pedagogical nature of the phenomenological project, the present chapter seeks to counter this view. I argue that, since Sense Certainty is the first shape of consciousness in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel expects his modern readers to *identify* with it, lest they would not get on board the pedagogical process he designed. This suggests that sense certainty captures modern intuitions about the nature of knowledge and reality.

Such exegetical considerations—which I lay out in Part 2—are meant to buttress the hypothesis that there is something peculiarly modern about sense certainty. In Parts 3 and 4, I work to establish the concomitant—and more crucial—hypothesis that sense certainty has what I call an *ethical basis*, or more specifically: it is grounded—or can be explained in terms of—a more basic commitment to freedom, freedom as self-determination.

To this end, I use a happy feature of Hegel’s *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. The third part of the *Encyclopedia*, the Philosophy of Spirit, includes an abbreviated version (“Phenomenology”) of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but unlike the latter—which stands alone—the encyclopedic Phenomenology is presented in its proper place within Hegel’s system. The Phenomenology is preceded by an elaborate section called the Anthropology, so that the endpoint of the Anthropology offers an explanation to the starting point of the Phenomenology. There is a deficiency in the anthropological standpoint for which the phenomenology is a solution.

The chapter recounts the transition from the Anthropology and
Phenomenology in the *Encyclopedia*, offering a practical account of the conception of knowledge (and reality) discussed in the beginning of the Phenomenology. In my reading, the deficiency of the anthropological standpoint consists in the “immediate” unity that it presupposes between the subject and his form of life—on the model of organic life in general; the phenomenological standpoint, by contrast, is marked by a rupture and disunity. This account is practical in the sense that it explains cognition—as the attempt to represent the world as other to the subject—in terms of the subject’s commitment to self-determination. Knowing the world as an object independent of the subject, I argue, serves the subject’s interest in asserting his independence from his form of life. The transition to the Phenomenology, then, marks the actualization of what makes the human uniquely human, namely, a capacity for self-determination.

**PART 1: The Hypothesis**

I begin with two Hegelian claims that give rise to my assumption that Sense Certainty is more than it seems, as it were; or more specifically, that it is an aspect of a more basic ethical constellation.

When Hegel moves from his discussion of consciousness to that of self-consciousness in the *Encyclopedia*, he asserts that self-consciousness is “the truth” or “ground” of consciousness.\(^{22}\) Claims of the general form ‘X is the truth of Y’ are prevalent in Hegel’s writing. They have both an ontological and an epistemic sense.

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\(^{22}\) “Die Wahrheit des Bewußtseins ist das Selbstdbewußtsein und dies dies der Grund von jenem, so daß in der Existenz alles Bewußtsein eines anderen Gegenstandes Selbstdbewußtsein ist” (E3, § 424).
Ontologically, they mean that Y is determined—has the identity it has—in virtue of its relation to X. In Hegel’s lingo, it means that Y is unified with X, namely, they are interdependent constituents of the same larger entity. To take a simple example, the truth of the hand is the body in the sense that the hand is determined as such in virtue of its being part or an aspect of the body.\textsuperscript{23} The epistemic sense of ‘X is the truth of Y’ follows from the ontological one, namely, we know Y as such in virtue of its grounding relation to X. However, that X is ontologically the truth of Y makes it the case that we can easily fail to know this truth. Thus, only because X efficiently determines the identity of Y, thereby differentiates it from other entities, can we be ignorant of X’s ontological role. The hand, for example, just because it is a healthy well-formed hand would seem to us independent of its (actual or “in truth”) dependence on the body. Hegel would say that we may be certain of the existence of the hand just by seeing it, but we are not necessarily aware of “the truth of this certainty,” namely, the body. Only if we come to this awareness, thereby grasp the determining ground of the hand, do we comprehend the hand and can be thereby said to genuinely know it.\textsuperscript{24}

Applied to the case at stake this general consideration invites the following interpretation. If self-consciousness is the truth of consciousness, then consciousness is determined by its being a part or an aspect of self-consciousness. It

\textsuperscript{23} This is not to say that X does not have a certain primacy to Y. I will discuss this primacy below, but I would like to stress, for now, that it does not imply that Y is dependent on X and not vice versa. The body would not have been a body if not articulated in particular organs (e.g., the hand).

\textsuperscript{24} To be sure, the formula ‘X is the truth of Y’ has other facets that are not necessary for my discussion at the moment, especially with regard to Hegel’s dialectical method. Thus it is not only the case that a knowledge-claim that Y, ignores its grounding truth; such a knowledge-claim is also doomed to generate a contradiction that would necessitate a move to the knowledge-claim that X.
also explains why we might take consciousness to be self-standing, failing to acknowledge its dependency on self-consciousness. Hence the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness, and the insight that the latter is the truth of the former, means that at this point we become aware of the implicit basis of consciousness that we had so far ignored. Yet, if consciousness is self-consciousness from the very beginning, it gives rise to the idea that this implicit basis informs and explains consciousness’s character, that is, the experience recounted in the first three chapters of the *Phenomenology*.

So far I explicated one Hegelian claim that I take to support the hypothesis that sense certainty should be understood in light of its ethical basis. The second Hegelian claim comes up in the beginning of Part III of the *Phenomenology*, Spirit. Hegel asserts that “all previous shapes of consciousness are abstract forms of it,” namely, of spirit (PhG ¶440).25 “Spirit” refers here to the historical and cultural contexts discussed in Part III, which are the only parts of the *Phenomenology* that describe concrete historical moments. They do not describe an individual subject only but rather a whole cultural and political context and how individuals interact within it. By contrast, the preceding parts of the book—Consciousness, Self-Consciousness and Reason—are “abstract forms” in the sense that they describe structures of experience that could be exhibited in various concrete moments. The general tendency of the *Phenomenology*—the education that the individual subject undergoes in its course—is to show the individual that his subjective operations,

25 Spirit, Hegel says a bit earlier, “is the [only] self-supporting, absolute, real being.”
either cognitive or practical, are dependent on his taking part in such concrete spiritual contexts.\(^{26}\)

Now, if consciousness is an abstraction, then any concrete subject who exhibits this structure has aspects that go beyond what is articulated by this abstract structure. And if the only concrete shape is spirit—that is, a shape that brings together an individual subject and her social and cultural context—then these implicit aspects are to be articulated in such a shape. When I read Consciousness under the assumption that consciousness’s ethical basis determines its experience, I wish to focus on the role of the concrete shape from which consciousness is abstracted. Indeed, the subject herself may disregard or ignore her social and cultural context as irrelevant for her knowing. Yet, as I said above, the ontological basis of a structure (“the truth” of this structure) may be effective even if it is easy to ignore it.

I am suggesting, then, that consciousness’s (implicitly) being self-consciousness and its taking part in a spiritual context, play a constitutive role in its experience. Consciousness is an “abstraction” whose full meaning is given only once we place it in a proper context, and this is what the next chapters set to explore.

\(^{26}\) I am following the discussion in Hyppolite (1979), 37ff. Some commentators do attribute historical specificity to the first chapters of the Phenomenology, e.g., Lucács (1976), 470-472, or Forster (1998), 305-308. Forster attributes Sense Certainty to human prehistory in ancient Persia and Perception to ancient India (p. 307). Yet, even if sense certainty as a shape of consciousness is more relevant to some epochs in history than to others in the sense that more (or virtually all) people in that epoch subscribed to the conception of reality and knowing articulated by this shape, this does not make it any less abstract. Indeed, it only means that in such epochs people were ignorant of the ontological role of concrete spirit. I myself argue later that sense certainty is especially relevant to understanding the world-view of the modern individual because she exhibits a similar ignorance.
The (constitutive) ontological role of self-consciousness and its spiritual context for cognizing consciousness becomes even more evident once we attend to Hegel’s phenomenological discussion in the *Encyclopedia*. The third part of this work, the *Philosophy of Spirit*, includes an abbreviated version of the 1806 *Phenomenology*, and unlike the latter, it places the advent of cognizing consciousness on the background of its natural and social context. Hegel stresses that the business of the phenomenological discussion is not cognition “conceived [only] as a determinacy of the logical Idea, but in the way in which the *concrete* [konkrete] Spirit determines itself to cognition” (E3 §387, Hegel's emphasis). A bit earlier, he asserts that actual Spirit has two presuppositions, namely, “external nature for its immediate presupposition and the logical Idea as its first presupposition” (E3, §381Z). As we shall see below, the fact that they are presuppositions [*Voraussetzungen*] makes them basic or determining with regard to consciousness’s experience, but also such that it is easy to ignore their ontological role.

**PART 2: The Modernity of Sense Certainty**

So far I discussed the basic hypothesis of the present chapter, namely, that consciousness’s ethical basis determines and explains its conception of knowledge. This assumption, however, gives rise to a major difficulty. After all, it amounts to the claim that there is something missing—indeed, something very basic—in Hegel’s argument. Thus, it is a straightforward expectation that a proper argument would
offer all the materials necessary to make sense of its progression. If it progresses from A to B, I do not have to accept B in order to see how it follows from A. Yet, it seems that my exegetical assumption in reading Consciousness suggests that indeed, I have to accept that consciousness is self-consciousness (B) in order to see how self-consciousness follows from consciousness (B follows from A). To be sure, arguments might omit some reasons for transitions, and as such be less comprehensible or convincing. The reader, insofar as she is interested in establishing the conclusion, might take the effort to fill in the lacunas. This is a common exegetical practice when dealing with the philosophical tradition. Yet, we would find it hard to take seriously an argument that deliberately omits details that are necessary for understanding its progression.

I believe, however, that such a charge would miss a fundamental aspect of Hegel’s project. The Phenomenology is first and foremost a story of ordinary consciousness’s Bildung—to the point it arrives at the standpoint of genuine philosophy (or “science”). This is the education of a specific shape of subjectivity, namely, of a subject who takes herself to know passively, receptively and independently of any other subject.27 As such, the Phenomenology does not offer an argument that applies to any rational creature whatsoever; it is an educational process tailored for a specific subject. This implies two things. First, insofar as there is a “target subject” to the Phenomenology, there are some details about the starting point of this experience that do not need to be argued for. These are details that refer to aspects of this target subject that are self-evident for her. Why, then, should

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27 See, for example, Taylor (1975), 128.
the reader first consider knowledge as receptive and passive? Just because this is the *obvious* conception of knowledge for ordinary consciousness. And the same applies, I suggest, for other assumptions about knowledge that Hegel introduces without providing us with any argument, e.g., that the powers that provide the subject with such receptive and passive knowledge are the senses; or that knowledge is such that a knower must be able to express it verbally.

The second claim following from the fact that the *Phenomenology* is an educational process with a target subject in view is that there are aspects of the experience that *must* remain implicit as to not undermine the educational goals. To make this claim clearer, consider the following example. Say we teach a young child that a person, any person, should consider the ends of all other persons prior to taking action—something on the model of the Kantian categorical imperative. The child might be able to recite this idea, but does she really comprehend it in a way that has actual consequences for her life? Hardly. A young child is just in the beginning of her moral development; she does not yet even understand what “ends” are. In fact, just *in order to* gain this understanding she should probably *ignore* the interests of others at first. Only after she understands what personal ends are—and why people care so much about their ends—can she come to understand the importance of universalism.

The underlying idea in this example is that an educational process would sometimes hide *some* of the truth at first, just in order to allow the person being educated to *come* to truth gradually. The phenomenological *Bildung* follows the same logic. Thus ordinary consciousness takes itself to know passively, receptively
and independently. Indeed, *in truth* its knowing has spontaneous and active aspects and is dependent on its social context. In fact, I shall argue in Part 4 of this chapter that such implicit aspects explain the details of Hegel’s narrative that are left without a proper argument, namely, sense certainty’s conception of knowledge. Yet, if consciousness would be presented with this truth (about its knowing) upfront, it would seem all too queer to it as it contradicts its own *explicit* conception of knowledge. Hegel rather wants consciousness to progress slowly, never giving it more than it could chew, as it were, in a given developmental stage.

That these issues occupied Hegel is clear from both biographical and textual evidence. References to *Bildung* are all too prevalent in the Preface and Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, and we know that Hegel was deeply interested in this issue around the time he was writing the *Phenomenology*, specifically on the connection between educating individuals and the betterment of humanity at large—an interest he inherited from other figures of German enlightenment and from a thorough reading of Rousseau’s *Emile* in the early 1800’s.\(^{28}\) A particularly illuminating reference to education can be found in paragraph 26 of the Preface, where Hegel first makes the distinction between the “standpoint of the individual” or ordinary consciousness and the “standpoint of science,” that is, between the starting point and the end point of the Phenomenological process. Let us briefly dwell on this passage.

\(^{28}\) Hyppolite (1979), 11.
Hegel marks the difference between the two standpoints in terms of the relation subjects occupying them have toward otherness, that is, anything different from them. From the standpoint of science, otherness is essential to “the life and self-certainty” of the individual; from the standpoint of the individual, by contrast, his existence and self-certainty are self-standing or un-mediated by otherness. The difference between the standpoints, then, is not inessential to what they are—as if one likes cookies and the other cakes; the difference rather defines them; the standpoint of the individual is the inversion of the standpoint of science.\(^\text{29}\) Hence the truth that science offers the individual appears to him as “an inverted posture [\textit{Verkehrtes}].” Asking the individual to accept it amounts to expecting consciousness “to walk on its head.”

It is because of the essential gap between the individual and the truth of science that the latter cannot be revealed to him upfront. He must rather undergo a process of \textit{Bildung}, in which he is exposed to knowledge in a gradual and controlled manner. What is at stake here is not whether the individual can merely believe the truth of science, or rather: it depends on what we mean by ‘believe’. In some minimal sense of ‘believe’ the individual could be said to believe the truth. Consciousness, Hegel says, might indeed attempt “to walk on its head.” Yet, this knowledge would lack “actuality” [\textit{Wirklichkeit}]; it would be merely “in-itself” in the sense that the individual cannot see how it is essential to his own life or existence.

\(^{29}\) This “is”, obviously, denotes an essential definition rather than yet another predicate. The individual is the inversion in the sense that he becomes an individual by negating the respects in which he is rather unified with the world. This claim will become clearer in Parts 3 and 4 of this chapter and in Chapter II below.
As such this belief would be abstract and unstable—the attempt to walk on the head, Hegel continues, would be “just this once” and appear to lack “necessity.” This is tantamount to the aforementioned young child who could recite the Kantian imperative without really comprehending it or incorporating it into her life; or to a person with exceptional memory yet lesser intelligence who could cite a mathematical theorem without truly grasping it. Such “knowledge” would be highly unstable. Indeed, if we identify genuine knowledge with comprehension, as Hegel does,30 we cannot say that the child actually knows the proof.

In the Preface, Hegel alludes to philosophical or religious currents that expect the modern individual to accept the truth upfront. They call the truth “the absolute”, “the divine” or “the eternal” and call upon the individual to accept the fact that his existence depends on these principles (PhG ¶7). Yet, as Hegel says, these are mere principles, and as such they are abstract or empty. Accepting them does not amount to knowing them, in the same manner that the expression ‘all animals’ “cannot pass for a zoology” (PhG ¶20). Hegel means, I suggest, that in order to understand zoology one must first be familiar with its particular constituents. One must bracket the general idea and focus on particular animals and their concrete features and behavior. Only then can one see the differences and similarities between various animals, till we can finally take one to know—that is, to understand—what zoology is. Similarly, it does not count as knowledge of the Absolute if the individual asserts, say, ‘I know the absolute’. The individual must go through a process in which he

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30 See PhG ¶31, where Hegel contrasts comprehension or genuine knowledge with mere “familiarity”, namely, entertaining content without grasping its determining grounds.
familiarizes himself with the constituents of the Absolute and understand how they are necessarily determined in relation to each other. This process is the *Bildung* of ordinary consciousness.

We see, then, that if we aim in what Hegel calls “actual” knowledge of the absolute—rather than merely abstract—the process of acquiring knowledge should take the form of *Bildung*. In *Bildung*, truth is not revealed all at once; moreover, some aspects of the truth *must* be hidden, just in order to allow the person undergoing the *Bildung* a proper developmental process. It is because the *Phenomenology* is the *Bildung* of ordinary consciousness that the latter cannot know the truth upfront; it has to embark on a long path of education.

The Phenomenology as the *Bildung* of the Modern Reader

Having said that, one might argue that I defended Hegel only in terms of what we can call the “pedagogical task” of the *Phenomenology*, while it does nothing to defend its epistemological credentials. Thus, I argued that Hegel omits details from his description of consciousness’s experience because these details are either self-evident for this “target subject” or should be hidden from him for the sake of a proper *Bildung*. However, this only pertains to “ordinary consciousness”, the subject undergoing the experience. What about us, the readers of the *Phenomenology*? Why should we accept such a starting point, insofar as it presupposes the implicit

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31 The phrase the “*Bildung* of the Modern Reader” is ambiguous between (1) the *Bildung* the reader is to undergo; and (2) the *Bildung* the reader already has as a modern individual, lest he couldn’t have identified with Sense Certainty. I mean it in both senses. It is because the reader is *gebildet* as a modern that he can benefit from the *Bildung* he would undergo in reading the *Phenomenology* (which consists, in turn, in “recollecting” past experiences that only moderns could fully have).
Baggage that ordinary consciousness brings with it to the experience? And if this is the case, the Phenomenology seems flawed from an epistemological point of view.

These questions pertain to two oft-discussed problems in Hegel scholarship. One is the so-called “problem of the we”, that is, the question of what Hegel has in mind in his frequent references to the readers of the Phenomenology, using the first person plural. Does he imply that the readers know something (or maybe everything) that he knows, and as such they are already in the standpoint of science, merely watching ordinary consciousness undergoing its Bildung? This brings me to a second familiar problem in the secondary literature, namely, the question whether Hegel intended to offer a presupposition-less philosophy. If we the readers should accept upfront the standpoint of science, it seems that Hegel’s philosophy rather has presuppositions, and, as such, is epistemologically inadequate.32

I would like, however, to set the “epistemological task” aside and claim that my argument in this chapter allows me to remain neutral with regard to it. The question whether Hegel’s system is epistemologically warranted or presupposition-less as a whole is distinct from the question whether one must avoid any presuppositions when one first approaches it. That the starting point of philosophy should aim in presupposition-less “thinking” is an idea that modern philosophy inherited from Descartes. Hegel never assumes this first person perspective—a person who is committed to nothing but the judgment of her own free thinking—and insofar as the modern idea of epistemology was shaped by this Cartesian

32 For a useful discussion of both these problems and ways to respond to them, see Bristow (2007), 205-238.
heritage, it is not surprising that Hegel has been sometimes taken to be altogether uninterested in epistemology. But, there is a very good epistemological reason why Hegel avoids this perspective. It is not because he believes that philosophy does have to rely on presuppositions, but because this very perspective presupposes something, namely, that there is a self-standing subject who can judge or reason independently of the objective world. This “subjectivism”—that Hegel attributes also to Kant and Fichte—is the presupposition that he wants to avoid.

In fact, according to recent commentators, Hegel was deeply committed to epistemology, but he was mostly occupied with ancient sceptical challenges rather than with those of Descartes or Hume, and this is precisely because the ancients did not assume the subjectivism to which the moderns are implicitly committed. According to Michael Forster, a chief advocate of this view, Hegel’s epistemological strategy does not consist in avoiding presuppositions in the starting point of the Phenomenology; rather, the book is designed to demonstrate that almost any possible philosophical view—each with its own presuppositions—is self-contradictory. The only view that survives this assault is Hegel’s own, and because there is no consistent “other” or counter-view to it, it is rendered epistemologically justified.

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33 See Baillie (1901), 42; Solomon (1985), 184-185; or Scruton (1982), who puts much weight on the fact that Hegel “avoids the first-person standpoint.”

34 For a thorough discussion see Forster (1998), Ch. III, esp. 187-188. Also the opening chapters of Forster (1989). I cited other advocates of this view in the Introduction.

35 Forster (1989), 167-174. This is Hegel’s response to the ancient sceptical “equipollence problem”. Forster goes on to treat Hegel’s response to a few other ancient challenges.
This account of Hegel’s epistemological strategy has consequences for the “problem of the we”. We the readers do not need to “accept” the presuppositions held by the protagonist, ordinary consciousness. The protagonist in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology* represents one view (about knowledge and reality) in a long series of views. We just need to follow the protagonist’s experience and see how each of these views is refuted. To be sure, some of the readers may identify with some shapes of consciousness, insofar as they represent a view that is similar to theirs. But, it is not that they *have* to subscribe to any view in order to have Hegel’s own view justified for them.

Therefore, the question whether we, the readers, accept the protagonist’s presuppositions, is *not* an epistemological question, in the sense that answering it would *not* tell us whether Hegel’s system as a whole is epistemologically warranted. Yet, I think it is still necessary to address this question, because it is crucial to assessing Hegel’s success in realizing the *pedagogical*—rather than the epistemological—task of the *Phenomenology*.

What is this pedagogical task? Above I used this expression in relation to the protagonist of the book, the “ordinary consciousness” who undergoes the *Bildung*. Yet, it is clear from the Preface that not only the protagonist is educated in the course of its experience but also the modern individuals who read about it—or rather, they will be so educated if the pedagogical task is successful. Hegel’s interest in educating the modern individual is widely recognized as a chief motivation of his philosophical enterprise. The theoretical motivation of his work, elaborating what he takes to be the truth, is in the service of changing the problematic relationship
between the individual of European modernity and her social and historical context. This is evident, for example, in the Preface, where Hegel characterizes the individual who is to get the Bildung as standing in the end of “the enormous labor of world history,” namely, as modern (PhG ¶29).36

Now, if we the readers are also targeted for Bildung, then it is crucial that the starting point of the Phenomenology will be such that we could identify with it, regardless of whether this is necessary from an epistemological point of view. To see the distinction at stake, consider the challenge of teaching a mathematical theorem. It could be justified or sound as a whole but still taught poorly in the sense that the students could not identify with the starting point of the teacher; hence, they would not even get to the point where they can assess the soundness of the theorem. Similarly, whether Hegel’s system as a whole is epistemologically warranted, is a question that the reader can assess only after reading the whole book. The reader would hardly get to this point if Hegel cannot get her on board. Therefore, the success of the pedagogical task hinges on the extent to which the reader can identify with the starting point of the Phenomenology.

The Modern Individual as an Ordinary Consciousness

Having this discussion in place, we can return to the question I presented above. Why does Hegel expect us, the readers, to identify with the presuppositions of

36 See Forster (1989), 20ff, Pinkard (1994), 16, or Dewey (2010), 103, where an account of Hegel’s mature philosophy begins with the statement that “[h]is chief interest was practical rather than merely theoretical.”
“ordinary consciousness”? On the face of it, we have at least two reasons to believe that a typical reader of the Phenomenology would not identify with them or that Hegel does not even want her to so identify. First, ordinary consciousness—especially in its first appearance as sense certainty—entertains a very unsophisticated notion of reality and knowing, according to which we know whatever presents itself to our senses just because it was so presented. To the extent that the typical reader has a philosophical background, we can expect her not to identify with such a simple, not to say simplistic, view.

The second reason why such an identification seems less than likely is that Hegel makes it clear that there is a major difference between the readers and ordinary consciousness. Consciousness is moving from one phase of its experience to another without knowing how and why. For example, it first takes ultimate reality to consist in whatever presents itself to the senses; then—in having the structure of a thing with properties, so that only sensuous content that can be related to an underlying thing would count as real. Consciousness itself does not understand why its conception of reality changes, similarly perhaps to a developing toddler (PhG ¶87). We, however, are expected to see how this transition (as others) necessarily follows from consciousness’s own nature. If this is the case we have to account for the source of this difference between ordinary consciousness and the readers. What is it that allows us to see the necessity of this progression? A ready answer would be that we have a certain critical distance from the protagonist by not sharing its presuppositions. So not only that we are not likely to identify with them; Hegel does not want us to identify so that we maintain enough distance from the protagonist.
Yet, given the pedagogical considerations I presented above I would like to insist that Hegel does expect his modern readers to identify with consciousness. Moreover, I believe that he has good reasons to anticipate such identification. While there should be some distance between the reader and the protagonist, the right way to describe this distance would not be non-identification but rather what we may call “critical” or “reflective” identification.

The first reason why identification with consciousness is anticipated is that “ordinary consciousness”, much as it is unsophisticated, is very common. As one commentator puts it, we are all ordinary consciousnesses some of the time.37 Even if I am a Kantian, and subscribe to a sophisticated theory according to which sensual contents are just “appearances”, I will still treat them as real in my capacity as an ordinary person. Second, Hegel believes that the standpoint of ordinary consciousness—and sense certainty in particular—is especially relevant to understanding the modern worldview. Thus in the chapter about the Enlightenment he says that consciousness “which in its very first reality is sense-certainty [...] returns here to this from the whole course of its experience.” The modern individual, then, subscribes again to ordinary consciousness’s notion of reality, according to which it consists in “things of sense, i.e., of thing which immediately and indifferently confront” it (PhG ¶558). In other places, Hegel identifies modernity with a commitment to knowledge being immediate, namely, in line with a key presupposition of ordinary consciousness.38 To be sure, this is not to say that the

37 Bristow (2007), 234.
38 LHP 198: The reliance on immediacy is “the most widespread standpoint of our time”, and characterized
modern individual—hence the reader of the *Phenomenology*—is the same or nothing more than ordinary consciousness (and I will shortly discuss the difference); it is just to say that there is enough similarity to secure a good degree of identification.

The third reason why Hegel can expect identification brings together the first two. Thus in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel says that philosophers in modernity maintain a clear separation between the philosophical doctrines to which they are committed “internally”, and their “external” or public commitments (LHP 85). In other words, even if I am a radical skeptic *qua* philosopher, I will behave in ordinary life *qua* ordinary person. By contrast, Hegel adds, ancient philosophers would leave the ordinary context and take part in “schools” while in the middle ages philosophers have withdrawn to monastic life. Thus, an ancient skeptic would allegedly insist on his skepticism in his ordinary dealings, but in modernity, as James Conant says, “the skeptical discovery cannot be converted into practice [...] we are obliged to live as if we could bridge the gap in question,” or—to use a metaphor of a famous modern skeptic, David Hume—we are doomed to “leave our philosophical study and return to the backgammon table.”39 So a third reason why Hegel can expect his readers to identify with consciousness—*despite* the fact that they are philosophers—lies in his diagnosis of *modern* philosophers.

So far I have argued that in light of the pedagogical task of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel *wants* his modern readers to identify with “ordinary

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39 Conant (2004), 107 & n17.
consciousness” and claimed that given his diagnosis of the modern individual, he has good reasons to predict that such identification would indeed obtain. The question now arises, how to reconcile this thesis with another expectation that Hegel has from his readers, namely, that they would be able to appreciate the necessity in the protagonist’s development. Since the identification requirement implies that the readers are similar to ordinary consciousness, we now need to account for a difference between them—a difference that would allow the reader to see something in the protagonist’s experience that the latter cannot see.

One way to account for this difference would be to say that the readers know something that the protagonist does not know. Indeed, Hegel’s use of the first person plural—as to include us, the readers, with him in the same group—invites such an account. It might imply that we know what Hegel knows. Jean Hyppolite seems to point in a similar direction when he says that we, the readers, in order to appreciate the necessity of progression, must “assume that the whole is always immanent in the development of consciousness.”\(^\text{40}\) If we are to assume that consciousness is dependent or mediated by Spirit as a whole, so it sounds indeed like we know what Hegel knows. This, however, makes no sense. After all, don’t we read the book just in order to be convinced by its conclusion? It is Hegel himself in a letter to Schelling that presents this book as the introduction to his system.\(^\text{41}\) What kind of introduction is it, if it introduces the reader to what she is already taken to know? Subscribing to such an interpretation would satisfy the requirement of a

\(^{40}\) Hyppolite (1979), 15.

\(^{41}\) Quoted in Forster (1998), 13.
distance or difference between the reader and the protagonist in the price of ignoring the requirement for identification.

Fortunately, though, there is a plausible alternative. When Hyppolite claims that we must “assume that the whole is immanent”, I do not understand “assume” as know but as presuppose or voraussetzen. In order to appreciate the necessity, the readers have to presuppose that Spirit as a whole is immanent in the protagonist’s experience, rather than know this. What is at stake in this distinction? Following William Bristow, I understand it in light of Hegel’s Kantian and Fichtean heritage.\(^{42}\)

Kant and Fichte hold that ordinary consciousness presupposes, say, the categories of experience and the unity of apperception. These structures inform its knowing and the latter is explained in reference to them, but as long as they are merely presuppositions, ordinary consciousness is not aware of them and therefore does not know its knowing. The job of philosophy as “the knowledge of knowing”—a notion Hegel elaborates in a lecture on Fichte\(^{43}\)—is to make these presuppositions explicit, to posit [setzen] consciously what ordinary consciousness only presupposes [voraussetzen] unconsciously. Only then does the subject count as having (explicit) knowledge, rather than mere (implicit) presuppositions.

Hegel follows a similar strategy. The philosophical reader qua ordinary consciousness has similar presuppositions to ordinary consciousness. Indeed, they both presuppose Spirit as a whole in their acts of knowing. Furthermore, as I argued above, the modern individual’s ideas about knowledge are similar to those of

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\(^{42}\) Bristow (2004), 209-211.

\(^{43}\) See especially LHP 231.
ordinary consciousness in Sense Certainty. This gives further support to Hegel’s anticipation that his reader would identify with the protagonist. The difference between them is not in what they presuppose but rather in the ability to take a certain distance from these presuppositions—facilitated both by the reader’s background and by Hegel’s design of the Phenomenology.

The first fact that generates a sufficient distance, I suggest, lies in the readers’ probable philosophical background or inclinations. I believe Marcuse has this idea in mind when he says that the reader of the Phenomenology must already “dwell in the element of philosophy”—namely, should be able to take an appropriate reflective distance from her experience and trace the necessity of its progression.\(^{44}\) Secondly, the reflective distance is facilitated by the fact that she is, indeed, a reader. The reader identifies with the experience of ordinary consciousness but she herself is sitting on the couch, so to speak, and looking at that experience from a safe distance. Indeed, it is the advantage of readers of a novel or the audience in a theatrical play over the protagonists whom they watch or read about.\(^{45}\)

In the Preface to the Phenomenology we can trace a third reason why Hegel thinks that a proper reflective distance would obtain between his readers and the protagonist, namely, the fact that the reader enjoys a historical distance from the protagonist.

\(^{44}\) Marcuse (1968), 129.

In paragraphs 28 and 29, Hegel places the modern individual in the end of the “enormous labor of world-history”; a history to which the individual relates as his “inorganic substance”. This substance or “spiritual substance” retains, as it were, the experiences of previous phases in the development of mankind. Hegel then says that the individual should “appropriate” this substance by way of seeing how it is essential to maintaining and exercising his individual subjectivity. I understand this point in light of my discussion above about what the Bildung offered in the Phenomenology is supposed to do. From the “standpoint of the individual” (PhG ¶26), it seems that social institutions and cultural heritage are an “other” to the subject; they are not necessary for his “life and self-consciousness”. In this sense, they are merely an “inorganic substance”. Yet, the truth of the matter is that his individuality is conditioned on them, and this is the truth revealed to him in the course of the Phenomenology. The individual will appropriate the substance by tracing the progress that it embodies from earlier to more advanced phases—up to the point in history in which the individual himself stands. By seeing how he is the necessary result of this long history, he could recognize his debt to human spirit as a whole. However, the modern individual does not need to actually go through this historical experience since past generations have already undergone it. Indeed, he “has less trouble since all this was already implicitly accomplished.” Instead, the individual need only recollect these experiences, like an adult that rehearses knowledge that she already acquired as a young child. The protagonist, by dramatizing the experiences of past generations, allows the modern individual to represent the past from a safe distance.
I am suggesting, then, that the reflective distance that Hegel anticipates with regard to his reader—that which would allow her to appreciate the necessity in the protagonist’s experience—lies in the *modernity* of this reader, in the sense of being in the *end* of history. History is retained in the modern “spiritual substance”, namely, I take it, in social institutions and cultural media. The reader can then trace past experiences from a reflective distance, helping herself to the narrative that Hegel designed in order to guide her recollection.

A helpful image to illuminate Hegel’s expectation from his readers is employed a few decades later by Friedrich Nietzsche. In the Preface to the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche says that a reader who wishes to understand him must “almost be a cow” since a proper reading is a form of “rumination.”⁴⁶ Rumination or *Wiederkäuen* is, literally, chewing again that which the cow has already chewed in the past. This means, I take it, that only a reader who is capable of drawing on past experiences can make sense of the grand historical narrative that Nietzsche provides in the *Genealogy*. This, I suggest, is the attitude that Hegel expects of his readers. To be sure, rumination rehearses past experiences of the *same* individual, and Hegel sometimes uses examples that point in the same direction, say when he compares the modern individual’s desired recollection with an adult rehearsing knowledge that she acquired as a young child. However, it is clear that for Hegel (and for Nietzsche as well),⁴⁷ the history of mankind as a whole is retained and lived

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⁴⁷ Nietzsche contrasts the desired reader, who is “almost a cow”, with a “modern man” [*moderner Mensch*] whom he does not want as his reader. What characterizes the non-desired reader, I take it, is his being modern not just in the sense of occupying a certain (current) point in time, but an attitude, namely, dismissing the past as irrelevant in light of modern progress. Such a reader would not be able to use this
again in the life of the individual, so recollecting one’s own early developmental stages amounts to recollecting collective history. For example, the advents of a toddler who is first employing her cognitive skills—on the model of sense certainty—reproduces the challenges faced by primitive human beings.

To sum up, I argued that the reader could keep a reflective distance from the protagonist because she is modern and philosophical. Being philosophical, “dwelling in the element of philosophy” as Marcuse puts it, makes her apt to follow the argument and its implications. Being modern generates distance because the reader can see the protagonist’s experience as pertaining to the distant past. As Hyppolite has it, “the history of naïve consciousness will be internalized by being recollected in the milieu of philosophic thought.”48 This is one element of what allows the reader to trace the necessity of the protagonist’s development, that is, in Taylor’s words, “to hold and connect together in the steady gaze what ordinary consciousness experiences without connecting.”49 Having said that, I also argued that Hegel secures a sufficient degree of identification between the reader and the protagonist, insofar as the experiences of ordinary consciousness, much as they represent early periods in human history, also apply to modernity. The dialectic of identification and

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48 Hyppolite (1979), 9.
49 Taylor (1975), 136.
distance—what I called reflective identification—contributes to the success of the *Phenomenology's* pedagogical task.

**Summary: The Pedagogical Task and the Ethical Basis Hypothesis**

In Part 1, I introduced the hypothesis that conceiving of consciousness as self-consciousness in a concrete spiritual context would explain aspects of its experience. Part 2 defended this claim against two possible objections. First, I argued that the fact that this ethical basis is not mentioned in Consciousness is not evidence against the hypothesis; rather, this basis is omitted in order to secure a proper process of *Bildung*. Second, I argued that the same holds for us, the readers. Since we are also educated in the course of the book, we are to be exposed to the underlying ethical basis only gradually. I suggested, further, that it does not render Hegel’s system epistemologically inadequate, since its epistemological credentials can only be assessed once one reads through to the end. It is the design of the *Phenomenology*—including avoiding discussion of consciousness’s ethical basis in the beginning—that is supposed to get us, the readers, on board, so that *eventually* we could assess the epistemological (and other) merits of the system as a whole.

However, this dissertation is not primarily about assessing Hegel’s pedagogical task in the *Phenomenology*. Rather, it is using a fortunate aspect of this task in order to serve another point, namely, offering an interpretation to the idea of the primacy of freedom to knowledge with regard to the modern individual in general, and with regard to modern skepticism in particular. Thus, it serves the
pedagogical task that the protagonist of Consciousness is committed to a conception of knowledge similar to that of the modern individual. This, to recall, generates the desired reflective identification between the reader and the protagonist. Yet, it also makes possible the following move: insofar as we can trace the ethical basis of the protagonist’s conception of knowledge, this suggests that, by Hegel’s lights, there is a similar basis to modern epistemology, which explains, in turn, its recurrent falling into skepticism.

As we shall see, once we juxtapose consciousness against its ethical basis, its conception of knowledge and other aspects of its experience are explained as serving a more basic interest in freedom (in a sense I shall discuss below). Why, for example, should consciousness (in its shape as sense certainty) accept the narrator’s demand that it say what it knows? It is in the very same chapter that Hegel mentions the ancient Eleusinian mysteries, for which knowledge was essentially unsayable—so there is an alternative. Or to pick another example: why the powers that deliver consciousness with “immediate knowledge” are the senses? Why not, say, intellectual intuition? Such questions get poor to no treatment in the secondary literature. Taylor, for example, says that “Hegel treats the ability to say as one of the criterial properties of knowledge.”\(^{50}\) But this hardly speaks in favor of accepting such a “criterial property”.

I believe that the general neglect of these questions in the literature stems from the conjunction of two facts. The first of these facts is the aforementioned

\(^{50}\) Taylor (1975), 141.
common interpretation of the *Phenomenology*, according to which the reader need not accept any of the protagonist’s conceptions in order to appreciate their continuous failure. Given such an interpretation, there is indeed no special urgency in explaining or justifying features of theses conceptions. However, I believe that if Hegel had started the *Phenomenology* with a much less straightforward or “ordinary” conception of knowledge—that of the Stoics, for example—commentators would be much more inclined to account for its features. Commentators, I suggest, neglect to provide such an account for the first conception of knowledge because it is indeed straightforward for them. So here is the second fact from which this neglect arises, namely, the fact that sense certainty—despite its simplicity, or rather because of it—fits well with our modern intuitions about knowledge, including features like verbal expression or sensuous access. In other words, features of sense certainty strike the modern reader (or the modern interpreter) as straightforward because they represent commitments that she herself has as a modern individual.

Having said that, this is not exactly a complaint against interpreters of Hegel since, as I argued before, neither the pedagogical task nor the epistemological task of the *Phenomenology* necessitate treating such questions in the way I treat them. If anything, the pedagogical task assumes that the reader identifies with the starting point of the book in a partly immediate or non-reflective manner. I would even suggest that treating such questions only *jeopardizes* such identification, insofar as it poses questions where the modern reader enjoys self-evident commitments.
However, from the point of view of my overall project it is critical to ask why consciousness entertains the conception of knowledge that it does. Insofar as I am able to show that it is its ethical basis that explains it, we would end up with an instance of the primacy of freedom to knowledge that does not apply only to the protagonist of the *Phenomenology* but to Hegel’s notion of the modern individual in general. We can now move to tracing ordinary consciousness’s ethical basis, and thereby establish the hypothesis introduced in Part 1.

**PART 3: The Deficiency of Organic Nature**

While the encyclopedic *Phenomenology* (like the 1807 version) refers to the experiencing subject as “consciousness” [*Bewußtsein*], the protagonist of the *Anthropology* is the “soul” [*Seele*]. Both 'soul' and 'consciousness' are terms that refer to the individual human being, but while soul signifies her as enjoying a "child-like unity with the world" [*kindhafter Einheit mit der Welt*], consciousness denotes a condition of separation. *Qua* consciousness the human being takes the world to be separate and independent of her, that is, as an object that is over and beyond her subjective or mental realm. What is the nature of this transformation from soul to consciousness? Why does it take place? These are the questions I explore in Part 3.

As a preliminary note, I would like to delimit the scope of my discussion. Thus the *Anthropology* is *inter alia* Hegel’s account of what we could call the natural history of mankind. It recounts the “particularization” of humanity into separate

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51 E3 §413Z.
"races" and national groups, characterizes them, and discusses the relationship of human beings to the natural world that they inhabit. I will leave this discussion aside and attend to it only insofar as it contributes to our understanding of a more specific question, namely, the development of the individual human being from childhood—which is marked by soulful "unity" with the world—to adulthood, marked by consciousness or separation.52 The "grand story"—that of the human species as a whole—is relevant since the individual in her childhood exhibits features that were more common, by Hegel’s lights, in earlier epochs in human history or prehistory (or are still more common in parts of the world that are not so developed, according to Hegel).53

Now, given that I focus on the individual human being, the question of the development from soul to consciousness takes the following specification. Qua soul the individual human being is already bodily differentiated. Her body has properties which differentiate it from the environment and from other individual people, and she enjoys what Hegel calls a self-feeling [Selbstgefühl] of herself as so different. This means inter alia that she differentiates between sensations coming "from inside",

52 Hegel himself in the Anthropology marks a difference between a treatment of the human collective and that of the individual. The discussion of the latter starts in paragraph 395 where he says that “the soul is differentiated into the individual subject” but stresses that it is not yet the condition of separation that characterizes consciousness. For, “this subjectivity comes into consideration here only as an individualization of natural determinacy”, that is, as the result of different properties between individuals rather than differences for the individuals (think of baby who is differentiated by properties from other human beings but is not yet conscious of it).

53 Recall Part 2, where I discuss – in relation to the Phenomenology’s Preface – Hegel’s equation of the development of the individual and that of the species as a whole. This way of thinking, common in 19th and early 20th European thought, is very apparent in the Anthropology. For example, Hegel discusses the phenomenon of "clairvoyance" [Hellsen] and says it is more common in "Spain and Italy, where the natural life of man is more universal" (E3 §406Z). Hegel thereby claims that in southern Europe many individuals did not reach a more advanced phase of human development (in which clairvoyance is only a rare mental pathology), since their civilization hadn’t yet reached this phase.
like desires or urges, and sensations coming "from outside", delivered by her senses. Yet, this difference from her surroundings coincides with a simultaneous sense of unity or identity. Indeed, she enjoys "child-like unity" with the world.

I would like to explain this unity—or better: differentiated unity—in terms provided by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Nature*, that is, in his account of organic life in general. Insofar as the Anthropology discusses the human being prior to her transformation to consciousness, it highlights the respects in which the human organism is continuous with organic life in general. Due to this continuity we can use organic life as a starting point for understanding human life. However, the overall goal is to point out the *difference* between mere organic life and human life. As we shall see, this difference boils down to the human commitment to freedom and capacities that allow humans to realize this commitment. While mere organic life exhibits some features of freedom—in a sense to be shortly explicated—it falls short of this ideal.

**Organic Unity: The Life-World**

We begin, then, with organic life in general. Drawing on Hegel’s discussion in the *Philosophy of Nature*, I would like to lay out four features of the concept of a living creature or an organism. This discussion will reveal the sense in which an organism exhibits unity with the world and some features of freedom.

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54 “Drawing on the Philosophy of Nature” is the right way to put it. I am not interested in the details of Hegel’s discussion there since I am not interested in his account of organic life *per se* but as a way to highlight key features of the human individual *qua* living. I am following the explication offered in Khurana (2013) and Kreines (2013).
First, the concept of an organism is an end or a purpose, that is, it provides us with a representation of how, say, a bird *ought to be*—which parts it ought to have and the appropriate lawful relations between them. Because the concept of the bird is an end, we can judge concrete birds as better or worse actualizations of this purposeful concept. A wingless bird is still a bird but a defective one, same with a sick bird that cannot fly for the duration of its sickness. By contrast, the concept of a stone lacks this normative dimension. There are no better or worse stones. To be sure, if I am a mason, I would judge specific stones as better or worse exemplars, but then the stone is judged as an instrument for an end that is *external* to it; or in other words—in relation to a concept entertained by the mason or a community of masons. This concept, call it the concept of a building stone, is indeed purposeful—but in a different way than the concept of a bird.

And this brings me to the second feature of the concept of an organism, namely, that it represents an end that is internal, rather than external, to the organism. That this end is internal is manifested in the fact that the organism produces and organizes *itself* in accordance with this concept. To be sure, various other entities, say human beings and other animals, may have uses for this organism, e.g., as prey or as a distributor of seeds. But these uses have no role in the creation and formation of the organism. They just take advantage of a fortunate happening that obtained regardless of them. By contrast, a table—like artifacts in general—has an external end, in the sense that someone else created it for the sake of her own end.

In Hegel’s lingo, the internality of the end—or concept—makes it the case
that organisms exhibit an identity or unity of concept and reality. The concept is not outside of the material reality that actualizes it, in the manner that the concept of an artifact is so external. Rather, the concept is immanent in material reality, which produces itself and develops in accordance with the concept. This talk might sound awkward, as we are used to think of concepts as mental entities, the kind of thing whose existence depends on a thinking subject. Thomas Wartenberg suggests that such a response has to do with the mentalistic bias of modern philosophy, starting with Descartes, which sets a sharp distinction between a subjective sphere of concepts and a non-conceptual material reality.\(^55\) Hegel, rather, draws on a platonic tradition within which concepts are immanent in nature in the sense that nature realizes them regardless of the availability of a subject who can represent these concepts and apply them.\(^56\) The concept of a tree, for example, is immanent in a seed, in the sense that it is a plan or a blueprint for the development of the seed into a tree.

The third feature of the concept of an organism is that it does not pertain only to an individual organism but to the genus or species of the organism. It is \textit{qua} member of its genus that the organism ought to conform to its concept. As Hegel sometimes puts it, the species or \textit{Gattung} provides the sense of "oughtness" [\textit{Sollen}] that is coupled with organic life.\(^57\) In some sense, then, the genus \textit{is} the concept (hence I will sometimes call it "genus-concept"). This feature of the concept of an

\(^55\) Wartenberg (1993).

\(^56\) Hegel: “In Purpose, we must not think at once or merely of the form in which it occurs in consciousness as a determination that is present in representation” (E1 204).

\(^57\) See Kreines (2013), 22.
organism—that it is, more precisely, the concept of a form of life—makes the idea that the organism produces and maintains itself tenable. For indeed, the individual organism is produced not by itself but by its progenitors; yet, since its progenitors are members of the same form of life, there is a sense in which the organism's cause is not other to it but identical with it.

The fourth feature of a concept of an organism is that it specifies lawful relations not only between parts or organs of the individual organism, but also between the individual organism and aspects of reality that are different from it. First, it specifies relations between the individual organism and other organisms of its species, e.g., its progenitors or organisms with which it is to mate and produce offspring. Second, it specifies relations between the individual organism and other forms of life or the natural habitat more broadly. As Hegel puts it, “the genus also assumes the shape of external universality, of an inorganic nature vis-à-vis the individual.”58 For example, it is part of the concept of a migratory bird of a certain species that it is to fly southwards when the temperatures in Europe drop in the end of the summer; it is part of the concept of a tiger that it lives off definite sorts of prey. We can call this feature of the concept of an organism its other-relatedness; in order for the organism to actualize its concept by self-producing and self-maintaining—modes of self-relation—it must relate to otherness.

So far, then, I discussed four features of the concept of an organism: its

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58 E2, §371. That is, the genus—as the concept of the organism—is both the members of the genus and certain conditions of inorganic nature. I changed the translator’s “against the individual” [gegen das Individuum] to “vis-à-vis” since the relation between the individual organism and the environment is not only antagonistic but also productive, mutually determining them as two organs of a unity.
purposiveness, its internality, its genus-ness, and its other-relatedness. The sense in which an organism is in unity with the world follows from this discussion. The organism is in such a unity in the sense that being an organism implies exhibiting lawful relations to aspects of the world that are different from it. This property—which we discussed as the other-relatedness of an organism's concept—is based on two other "unities", namely, between the organism and its concept (discussed as the internality of this concept) and between the particular organism and its genus (the concept's genus-ness).

Now, the individual soul—a particular human being—exhibits the same features that an organism in general exhibits. Hegel says, for example, that the human being—in her development through different stages of life—exhibits "concept-determined totality [Begriff bestimmten Totalität] of alterations which are brought forth by the process of the genus on the individuality" (E3 §396Z).59 A bit before he says that human children "have a feeling in them that what they are is not yet what they ought to be." A human being, then, is determined through a purposeful concept in the sense that it is always understood (and understands itself) in light of a certain ideal or "totality", namely, as manifesting this totality to a lesser or greater extent. This totality, in turn, is tied to the genus of the human being, to its form of life, hence to the genus-ness of its concept. The human being develops by way of bringing her individuality to a greater fit with what it ought to be according to its genus. Finally, this purposeful concept is not external to the human being in the

59 I modified the translation: Prozeß der Gattung mit der Einzelheit was translated as “the interaction of the genus with the individuality”, but this sounds too equal or symmetrical while Hegel means that the genus has more weight in this relationship.
sense that it serves the purpose of something else; rather, Hegel calls it the child’s "inner universality", and I take it to mean, in terms of the above discussion, that the concept of the human being is internal.

Finally, the human being exhibits what we called above other-relatedness and hence "a child-like unity with the world". The lawful relations between the individual human being and her environment are not shared by all human beings but depend on their specific natural surroundings. Thus Hegel spends quite a few pages describing the climate and other geographic conditions in various parts of the world and how these aspects of nature are necessary in order to understand the kind of people—or "races"—that inhibit these areas. According to Hegel, then, to be a person of a certain race is to relate to the environment in determinate lawful ways. Yet, much as there are different natural conditions that fit into the lives of different human beings, what is universal is that any human being exhibits such "fit"—regardless of its specification—with her peculiar environment, and in this sense, I suggest, she exhibits "child-like unity with the world". Furthermore, some natural conditions, Hegel argues—like the alteration of day and night—are incorporated into all human forms of life.

So far for the sense in which the human soul—like organisms in general—exhibits unity with the world. I will henceforth use the term “life-world” to designate this unity. This concept brings together the human genus and aspects of nature with which it regularly and lawfully interacts. When I say that a human being has a life-world, I mean that a properly developing human being is not only its own individual body but also a whole range of external conditions—like fellow humans, animals,
plants, inanimate nature—that fit into his life in determinate ways. Hegel himself does not use this term but nor does he need it, as for him to talk about the soul is to talk both about an individual soul and about a “world-soul” with which it is unified. For reasons of simplicity I focus on the soul as an individual human being and introduce the term life-world to capture the dimension in which it is unified with the external world.  

I will now draw on this discussion as to show why the unity of the soul does not amount to freedom, hence why the human being breaks this unity in order to realize her higher end, namely, freedom (in a sense I will shortly clarify).

From Unity to Freedom

I would like to begin by arguing that there are prima facie reasons to regard organisms in general as free—much as a decisive reason to rule this out. We could then see why the latter reason does not apply to the soul, a specific sort of organism, in virtue of what distinguishes it from other organisms, namely, its capacity for self-consciousness.

The sense in which organisms could be prima facie regarded as free is that they seem to exhibit autonomy. This claim may immediately face objection. After all, in its modern usage the notion of autonomy is heavy with a Kantian baggage within which autonomy is essentially connected with rational creatures. By Kant’s lights,

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60 The concept of life-world [Lebenswelt] has, of course, its own rich history in German thought starting the mid 19th Century. Insofar as it is usually taken to signify a pre-scientific understanding of the world, it is in line with my definition. Yet, I am using this term in the way I indicated, and avoid relating it to historical and (other) contemporary employments.
only a rational creature is autonomous, and in being autonomous she precisely does *not* operate according to natural laws. However, if we look closely at the concept of autonomy, we can recover a sense of it that does not immediately rule out attributing autonomy to organisms.

A subject of laws is autonomous insofar as the laws that govern its operation are its own laws. One way to understand this formula is that the subject is the source of the authority of these laws, that is, they are binding for the subject because it bound itself to them. This understanding of the formula figures heavily in commentaries on Kant’s moral theory, giving rise to a so called "Kantian paradox", as it is unclear how one can genuinely be the subject of law if choosing this law was an act of arbitrary freedom.61 Sebastian Rödl suggests an alternative understanding of the formula, namely, that falling under "its own laws" means that these laws follow from the concept of the autonomous entity. He argues that this is indeed Kant’s understanding of autonomy but regardless of the exegetical question, this understanding allows us—at least *prima facie*—to attribute autonomy to organisms.62

To see what Rödl has in mind we can start with Kant’s explanation of the opposite of autonomy, namely, heteronomy. In the *Groundwork*, he says:

> Natural necessity was a heteronomy of causes since every effect was possible only in accordance with the law that something else determined

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62 Rödl (2007), 114-120.
the efficient cause to causality.\textsuperscript{63}

If an entity falls under heteronomous laws, it is determined by conditions that are external to it. Heteronomous laws are not laws of freedom because exhibiting them amounts to being determined by something other to the entity that exhibits them. From this we can infer that laws of autonomy are laws of freedom since, by contrast, following them amounts to \textit{self}-determination.

Consider a piece of iron and a law under which it falls, e.g., "when the air is humid, the iron rusts." This last sentence expresses a law of heteronomy because it explains a certain determination of the entity in reference to an external condition. By contrast, consider a migratory bird. "When temperatures drop, the bird migrates southwards." On the face of it, this law also refers to an external condition, the drop of temperatures in the end of the European summer. But this external condition is nonetheless internal in the sense that it is a law \textit{of} the migratory bird that the temperatures would drop in permanent intervals. Whereas it is part of what it is to be a migratory bird that the external condition of temperatures dropping obtains, a piece of iron could exist without the air ever being humid and hence without ever rusting. More generally, it is part of the concept of an organism that certain external conditions are to obtain and this concept specifies lawful interactions between these conditions and the individual organism. Indeed, this is a feature of the concept of an organism that I called above its other-relatedness. In the same manner that it is part of the concept of a migratory bird that temperatures would drop in the end of

\textsuperscript{63} This is Rödl’s translation in Rödl (2007), 118.
summer, it is part of the concept of a chimpanzee that it lives off fruit so that fruit must be available, and it is part of the concept of a cactus that it grows when desert-like habitat obtains.\textsuperscript{64}

My suggestion that organisms could be regarded as autonomous since they operate according to laws that are specified by their own concept draws on two features of the concept of an organism that we discussed above, namely, its purposefulness and its other-relatedness. Only an entity with a \textit{purposeful} concept can be autonomous, since only such an entity realizes certain laws not because they are necessitated by external conditions but rather because its own purpose necessitates them. A piece of iron indeed falls under some necessary laws—say "if the air is humid, iron rusts"—but they are not necessary in virtue of its own end; iron does not have an end. A piece of iron can exist without ever rusting; this would not make it "defective iron". As for \textit{other-relatedness}, there might be entities that are autonomous without relating to any external condition;\textsuperscript{65} yet an entity that does relate to external conditions—like an organism—is autonomous only if its concept is other-related, because only then are these external conditions nonetheless internal to the entity in the sense that they are part of its concept.

\textsuperscript{64} Another way to bring out the autonomy of organisms is to describe their operation in terms of Kant's distinction between categorical and hypothetical laws. Laws of autonomy are always categorical because the condition in a law of autonomy is internal to the entity that follows the law. Hence the necessity of the law follows from the entity itself rather than from what is other to it. For example, the necessity of the law "when temperatures drop, the bird migrates southwards" follows from the concept of a migratory bird. It is necessary in the sense that it is not dependent on an external condition that may or may not obtain. To be sure, on the face of it, and since this law includes an antecedent, it may strike us as hypothetical. This is the case with the law "when the air is humid, the iron rusts" which is indeed a hypothetical law and as such a law of heteronomy. Yet, the question is not the apparent structure of the law but rather the relation between the antecedent and the concept of the entity. If the antecedent is part of this concept this law is categorical; if it is external to it, it is a law of heteronomy. See Rödl (2007), 118-119 and also Thompson (2008), Part I: The Representation of Life.

\textsuperscript{65} There is a sense in which Spirit is such an entity but it is not pertinent to my discussion at the moment.
We have to appeal to yet another feature of an organism's concept, its internality, in order to rule out a move that our discussion so far allows, that is, attributing autonomy not only to organisms but also to artifacts. After all, there is a sense in which a computer, for example, operates according to its own laws, laws that are specified by its concept. However, this would not be autonomy, because much as laws of operation are specified by the concept of a computer, the concept itself is not of the computer; the concept is external to it, namely, it is in the mind of its creator. By contrast, and as we explained above, the concept of an organism is internal to the organism because the organism produces itself in accordance with this concept. The internality of the concept of an organism, then, is also a necessary aspect of its alleged autonomy.

However, attending to the feature of an organism's concept that we are yet to consider would reveal the reason why organisms may not, after all, be regarded as autonomous. It makes sense to say that an organism produces itself in accordance with its concept only if we do not talk about an individual organism but rather about the species or form of life. This is the feature I called above genus-ness. A concept of an organism is not a concept of the individual organism but of its genus or form of life. It follows that regarding an organism as autonomous is based on identifying it with its genus. Only if the organism is identical with its form of life are the laws specified by the latter's concept the organism's own laws. But can we take this identity for granted?

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66 See Khurana (2013), 17.
The identity between the individual organism and its life form is given or immediate; the organism was simply born this way, so to speak, as a member of a certain species. Above I suggested that autonomy amounts to freedom since, unlike heteronomy, it constitutes a sense in which an entity is self-determined. But if an organism's alleged autonomy rests on a given or immediate identity—an identity that was externally determined—then it follows that even if it is autonomy (depending on one's definition of this term), it is not autonomy that amounts to freedom as self-determination. My discussion so far, then, has offered prima facie reasons to attribute autonomy to organisms despite their inability to identify with their own laws. They are autonomous, I suggested, in the sense that they exhibit laws that follow from their own concept. But in the end of the day, it seems that this autonomy, if this term even applies, does not make them self-determined since the identity of the individual organism with its concept is externally determined.

Incidentally, this consideration shows why Rödl, much as he offers an alternative interpretation to the concept of autonomy, stops short of attributing autonomy to organisms. Also for Rödl, autonomy requires self-consciousness, since only a self-conscious subject can acknowledge the law as hers. To be sure, acknowledgement does not function for Rödl as the source of the law's authority but rather as the mode in which the subject falls under the law; only a self-conscious subject acts according to a representation of the law, so an acknowledgement mediates the relation between the subject and the law.67 An organism, obviously,

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67 The distinction between acknowledgement as the ground of the law and acknowledgement as the mode of authority of the law is made by Brandom (1998), 50.
lacks the power to acknowledge the law as its own—to affirm its identity with its genus—and therefore, I take it, Rödl avoids attributing autonomy to organisms.

We can now return to the topic of Part 3, the soul. Since it exhibits the four features of a concept of an organism, it is also free in the same *prima facie* manner. However, the ultimate reason not to count organisms as free does not apply to the soul. For, the individual soul can affirm the identity between itself and its genus, and thereby show, as Jean Hyppolite puts it, that “life can only be a whole for the consciousness of life.”

The soul, then, by transforming itself into consciousness, realizes a capacity to affirm its identity with “life as a whole”, that is, its genus (and life-world).

Furthermore, it is not only that the human individual *can* be free but that he *ought* to be free. For, it is part of the purposeful concept of Spirit, hence the concept of a spiritual being like a human being, that what falls under it must come to know itself as identical with its genus, namely, Spirit. Thus, "[i]n the concept in general [...] every determinacy in which it presents itself is a moment of the development and [...] a step forward towards its goal, namely, to make itself into, and to become for itself, what it is in-itself" (E3 §387R). And this, in turn, amounts to realizing what Hegel calls "the essence of Spirit", namely, freedom (E3, §382Z).

Hegel defines this essential freedom of Spirit as “not being dependent on another” [*Nichtabhängigkeit*] and the “relating of itself to itself” [*Sichaufsichselbstbeziehen*]. Given the discussion above I understand the latter

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68 Hyppolite (1973), 12.
property, call it self-relating, as a necessary but not sufficient condition of the former, call it self-determination.\(^69\) Thus, if in order to be what it is, an entity must relate to something else, then it is thereby externally determined by this otherness, hence not self-determined. Yet, an entity could be self-relating but not self-determined, e.g., an organism, for the organism is self-relating only in virtue of a given identity, its identity with its genus. By contrast, only a spiritual being can identify with Spirit and thereby be self-determined.

At this point, however, we have to be careful of subscribing to too simple a picture of the emergence of consciousness from nature, according to which the human individual's becoming conscious consists in affirming a prior identity between himself and his genus (for only then would he realize his end, being free). After all, why does knowing a state of affairs which is prior to the moment of knowing it, amounts to an act of freedom or self-determination? In the same vein, we could take my knowing that there is a tree in front of me to be an act of freedom. But if anything, such knowing exhibits the fact that the tree is forcing itself on me; I am thereby externally determined by the tree, rather than being self-determined. Therefore, saying that I am free by knowing an identity that obtains prior and independently of knowing it sounds, at the very least, paradoxical, if not outright false. Fortunately, though, this is not Hegel's position.

\(^69\) This might seem too fast. Does non-dependency amount to self-determination? I think the answer is positive. If I am externally determined, it means that one (or more) of my properties is dependent on my relation to something else. Therefore, to be independent is to be self-determined, that is, not to have properties that are externally determined. However, there is no need to defend this claim conceptually. Suffice to point, textually, to Hegel’s endorsement of “self-determination” as the most basic concept of freedom (its “formal definition). Quoted by Neuhouser (2000), 18.
Freedom as Negation of One’s Life-World

In response to this worry, we should make a provisional distinction (to be challenged later) between two concepts under which the human beings falls—its concept as an organic creature and its concept as a spiritual being. As an organism or a living creature, the human being has a concept similar to that of an organism in general. This concept has a determinate content in the sense that it specifies a range of laws that determine the human being's as what Hegel calls "bodiliness" [Leiblichkeit; E3 402Z] or "natural individuality" [Naturindividualität; Ibid.]—that is, its organic structure, much as its interactions with its species in particular and the environment more generally. This concept, in other words, is the "life-world" of the human being as a natural creature. It is under this concept that the human individual is a "soul" and thereby exhibits "child-like unity with the world" and the prima facie autonomy discussed above. With regard to this concept, the human individual is indeed passive; she is born as falling under it, and therefore affirming her identity with it would amount to knowing that there is a tree in front of me. This is one reason, I take it, why Hegel's term for this concept in the Anthropology is "substance" [Substanz; E3 §396Z]—a substance in the sense that it is given, like an inert fact that the subject is faced with.

But there is a second concept under which a human being falls—not as "bodiliness" or "natural individuality" but as a spiritual creature. While the first concept is rich with content—it specifies how a natural human ought to be structured and interact with her world—the second concept is merely formal. Qua spiritual being the human being is committed to freedom in the sense of self-
determination, hence fulfilling this commitment consists in negating any content which seems to externally determine the subject. It is formal since this operation is indifferent to the content on which it is exercised.

Textually, once Hegel talks about the human being as self-consciousness, his term for the concept is no longer "substance" but rather "spirit as such" [der Geist als solcher; E3 §384Z]. "Nature," he says, "is driven onwards beyond itself to Spirit as such, that is, to the Spirit which, by thinking, is for itself in the form of universality and actually free." So Hegel sets a contrast between human development so far, prior to the emergence of self-consciousness—so as substance or mere organic life—and the developmental phase of consciousness, which is the point when man actualizes his spiritual side, becoming a subject. Thus, "it is man who first raises himself [...] to the universality of thought, to awareness of himself, to the grasp of his subjectivity, of his I" (E3 §381Z).

We can now attend to the way in which these two concepts operate with respect to the purpose of the human being as a spiritual being, namely, self-determination. With respect to the first concept—the "substance" or natural genus of the human being—it is true that the human individual fully realizes her essential freedom only when she affirms her identity with it. But this moment obtains in the very end of her Bildung, that is, it expresses a state of complete self-understanding. In Hegel's system, this condition is described in the last chapters of the Phenomenology of Spirit. At that point it turns out that only given the natural substance of the human being—her life-world—could she exercise her freedom as a spiritual being. Hence the two concepts that I provisionally distinguished above are
nonetheless unified. They are unified in the sense that the human being’s natural concept is actualized for the sake of actualizing her concept as Spirit, namely, being self-determined. Insofar as nature serves the ends of Spirit, it is not something other to Spirit; hence the individual’s dependence on nature will be revealed to be not dependence on otherness but rather self-dependence or self-determination. This, however, goes far beyond the scope of my discussion, and I want to use this eventuality only as to set a contrast with the moment at stake, namely, the emergence of self-consciousness. At this moment, realizing the spiritual concept implies, rather, negating or rejecting the human individual’s identity with its natural concept, for at this point the latter appears as other or different from her spiritual side.

Thus, the emergence of self-consciousness amounts to “liberation” [Befreiung] not because the human being comes, suddenly, to know her given identity with the genus or natural concept. It is, rather, the opposite which is the case, that is, it amounts to freedom because the human being qua self-consciousness negates or rejects this identity, namely, comes to take herself as other to—or different from—her genus. The human individual negates this identity just because it is given or externally determined, so in realizing her purpose—being free or self-determined—she must negate it.

Having said that, it seems that from one too simple a picture—that the human individual is free by affirming her identity with her genus—we moved to

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70 On this see Hyppolite (1973), esp. 9ff.
another too simple a picture, according to which she is free by negating or denying this identity. The first picture presents the emergence of self-consciousness as overly continuous with organic nature, as if the freedom of the self-conscious individual consists in affirming or knowing something that obtained regardless of self-consciousness. The second picture presents this emergence as overly discontinuous, as if this freedom consists in total rejection of nature, as if she is free insofar as she is fully independent of nature.

But this second picture is not simple, not to say simplistic, because of the way I present it. It is so because this is the way the self-conscious subject herself conceives of the relation between herself and the life-world in which she is embedded. As I indicated above, in the end of her phenomenological Bildung she would come to have a more complex (and true) picture of this relationship, but when she first asserts her independence of her genus—thereby realizing the spiritual purpose of self-determination—she also asserts the difference between herself qua spiritual being and herself qua natural individual, unified with a life-world.71

We can now move to Part 4, which proceeds from the developmental achievement we just discussed, namely, the actualization of self-consciousness, and shows how it explains the conception of reality (and knowledge) discussed in the beginning of the Phenomenology, namely, reality as other to—and independent of—

71 Hence also the provisional distinction that I made above between two concepts under which the human being falls is imprecise not only for analytical reasons (in order to make it simpler for us, who analyze this development); rather, the distinction is for the individual herself—it is her lived experience in a key moment in her development.
the cognitive subject.

Before I turn to this discussion one more point is in order. The account of the emergence of self-consciousness that I have so far elaborated has a teleological form. We explained self-consciousness as a capacity, which is actualized in order to realize the purpose of a spiritual being, namely, being free in the sense of self-determined. But teleological explanations cannot be the whole story. Even if a seed, for example, ought to be a tree, a full explanation of how it came to be a tree must appeal not only to this internal purpose but also to the conditions which make the realization of this purpose possible. Also with regard to self-consciousness Hegel offers such an explanation, albeit quite obscure, in the very end of the Anthropology. I will not, however, delve into this discussion. For my present purposes, it should suffice to say that for Hegel the teleological explanation is the crucial one. Even when he points to the conditions that trigger this actualization he stresses that it is "the nature of the logical Idea, developing everything from itself, [that] requires that this difference [the difference between the spirit and nature] be given its due" (E3 §412Z).

**PART 4: Ordinary Consciousness as an Aspect of Freedom**

So far I explained what I called above “the deficiency of organic nature”, namely, the reason why mere organisms (i.e. not human or rational) fall short of self-determination. Since they lack the capacity for self-consciousness, they cannot

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72 Cf. E3 §396Z: “the children’s own need to grow up is what makes them grow up. This striving after education on the part of children themselves is the immanent moment of all education." Hegel, then, while acknowledging the necessity of educators or care-takes for the development of the child, insists on the primacy of the child’s own purpose in explaining this development.
acknowledge their (immediate or given) identity with their genus. In the Anthropology section of the Encyclopedia, human beings are considered on the model of organisms in general; as such, they exhibit an immediate unity with their life form. However, in order to attain proper self-determination, they must negate this immediate unity, setting the rupture or separation that marks the phenomenological standpoint.

I would like to be clear about the respect in which I am interested in the transition from the Anthropology to the Phenomenology. Hegel sometimes gives the impression that this is a temporal or developmental process—as if the capacity that marks the phenomenological standpoint, self-consciousness, is actualized in a specific moment, located in time, in the development of the human child (E3 §396Z). Regardless of the merits of this interpretation, I understand this transition as predominantly logical. Thus, the Anthropology offers a range of concepts for understanding the human form of life—concepts which are carried over from Hegel’s account of organic life in general (in the Philosophy of Nature). In the end of the Anthropology, it becomes clear that these concepts fall short of making intelligible full-fledged self-determination. To do this, we have to posit the concept of self-consciousness. The Phenomenology assumes the actuality of this concept—that human beings are self-conscious—and shows its implications for the way in which they conceive of what is other to them. Furthermore, rather than to think of the anthropological “unity” and the phenomenological “rupture” as two phases in a temporal sequence, we are to think of them as two structures of experience that the same subject could interchangeably have. Thus, in some moments—say, when we
are engaged in activity that goes smoothly—there is a sense in which we are exhibiting the anthropological unity. And then, when we are observing the world from outside, as it were, we are taking the phenomenological standpoint.

The current part explores the connection between the actualization of self-consciousness and the specific conception of reality (and knowledge) that Hegel attributes to the subject in the first chapters of the Phenomenology. Why, given self-consciousness, would the self-conscious subject conceive of reality as other to—and independent of—his subjectivity?

We can begin with the somewhat trivial point that a self-conscious subject is conscious of herself. This essential property of self-consciousness, Hegel says, is articulated by the thought “I = I” or “I am I” as thought by the self-conscious subject. Hegel equates this statement with what he calls “abstract freedom”. Why freedom? And why abstract?

As we saw above, self-consciousness is free in the sense that it strives to self-determination. Insofar as the subject is immediately unified with her genus (as in the anthropological standpoint), we can say that her alleged (but ultimately conditioned) freedom is concrete, namely, in the sense that she follows a definite set of norms that articulate her genus-concept. However, since this freedom is conditioned on an immediate or given unity, she must negate this unity. The result is self-determination (since she determines herself as independent of her genus) but abstract, namely, negating any concrete norm. Self-consciousness is free, then, insofar as it negates or rejects any determinate norm. The individual thereby
conceives of himself as nothing but this negation of his life-world, and in this sense his self-determination is abstract.

**Immanent Contradiction**

Hegel says that abstractly free self-consciousness “is without reality” since its freedom is achieved by denying its relation to the “infinite variety of the world” (E3 §425Z). The discussion above should serve to clarify this claim. There is a sense in which reality—anything different from the subject, the “infinite variety of the world”—is still there for the subject; self-consciousness is conscious thereof. In this sense, there is a relation between the subject and reality. However, in another sense this relation is a non-relation since self-consciousness is conscious of the world as other to it. The contrast is with the individual soul, which was unified with the world in the sense that its experience thereof was mediated by the norms articulating its genus-concept. Once these norms are negated, the world appears as other to the subject. The subject’s realization of his self-determination, then—the negation of his genus-concept—signifies the world as other to him, as determining him from outside.

Therefore, the moment of abstract freedom is bound with a contradiction. Once the subject, for the sake of self-determination, negates or denies his relation to concrete reality, he thereby also affirms that this reality is nonetheless there as external. Hence, Hegel says, abstract self-consciousness is “burdened with externality”. This “burden” makes it the case that abstract self-consciousness—
consciousness of oneself—is always at the same time consciousness, namely, consciousness of otherness. For, self-consciousness, by abstracting from reality, *re-generates* it as otherness, so as the object of consciousness.

These simultaneous moments of abstract self-consciousness and consciousness of otherness constitute an *immanent* contradiction, namely, not only in-itself but *for* the individual himself. The self-conscious subject takes himself to be self-determined, but insofar as this self-conception is sustained only by negating otherness, it is thereby determined by something other to it—and therefore it is *not* self-determined.

It is because of the subject’s self-conception as self-determined on the one hand, and his necessary determination by otherness on the other hand, that this situation must pass beyond itself, as it were. The subject is necessarily pushed to prove his self-determination vis-à-vis the reality confronting him.

Now, as long as self-consciousness takes itself to be abstract, namely, nothing but the negation of any content, there are two logical possibilities to try and settle the contradiction. To be sure, both of these possibilities are ultimately unsuccessful, but they still represent necessary moments in the *Bildung* of the subject, that which leads him—ultimately and through these failures—to change his self-conception by re-identifying with his life-world.

The first logical possibility is to negate or deny the reality of that which confronts the subject, determining her from outside. If there is nothing but abstract self-consciousness—if there is no object—then one pole of the contradiction is
eliminated and the contradiction is solved (or rather dissolved). This is the possibility described in the part of the Phenomenology titled Self-Consciousness. As desiring self-consciousness, the individual consumes or destroys [vernichtet] the concrete world confronting her, trying to prove the latter’s nothingness. We should be clear, though, about the sense in which reality is negated. It is not the denial of the fact that something (call it “content”, Inhalt) is there, present to the subject’s consciousness. In Hegel’s terms, it is not the denial of the content’s mere being [Sein]. Rather, it is the denial that this content is to affect the subject’s determinations—e.g., his actions or beliefs. In this way, the subject can maintain his self-conception as self-determined since (allegedly) nothing determines him.

This strategy fails for reasons I cannot discuss at length at the moment. Suffice to say that the very activity of negation shows that this content—which self-consciousness negates—does determine the subject, namely, to this very activity of negation. The contradiction, then, remains. I would like to move to the other path self-consciousness pursues in order to settle the contradiction.

Rather than show that the object is nothing—in order to prove his own self-determination—the individual can do something else. He can show that the content is there as an object, separate and other to the subject, and that it determines him as an object. On the face of it, this seems to be at odds with the point of this whole operation. After all, the individual strives to prove his self-determination, not to acknowledge that an object externally determines him. However, there is a crucial difference between the way the individual was externally determined within the anthropological standpoint and being externally determined by the object. As a soul,
the individual was determined by the norms of his genus, conditioned on a tacit identification with his genus. As a subject—confronted and externally determined by an object—the individual is externally determined because the object is forced on him; he doesn’t identify with the object. There is a sense, then, in which this constellation affords more self-determination than the previous, anthropological one. It might be helpful to think, in this connection, on the sense in which recognizing oppression as such is a step towards freedom. I could be a factory worker who works mechanically, tacitly (or even explicitly) embracing the norms of conduct in the factory. I could, alternatively, resist these norms. But there is a middle step: I am to recognize these norms as other to me, as such that I can resist them. This is the step, I will shortly argue, which self-consciousness actualizes in the Consciousness Part of the Phenomenology.

However—and this is crucial—if this path is indeed chosen it cannot be exercised self-consciously. That is, if the subject were conscious of the fact that she works to prove the reality of the object for the sake of proving her own self-determination, then this path would be hopeless. For then it would be clear that it is the subject that posits the object, hence the object does not really externally determines her. So this path might contribute to the process of establishing the self-determination of the subject, only if the subject is not aware that she is conscious of the object in the service of her self-consciousness as free.

I would like to argue that this latter path is described in Consciousness, the first part of the Phenomenology. In Consciousness, the subject has a conception of reality as separate and external because it serves the end of proving her own
separate self-determination. Just in order to fulfill this end, the subject must be ignorant of it. Cognition in Consciousness, then, is the business of establishing the separateness and externality of what is other to the subject, and the point of cognition is, ultimately, to establish the freedom or self-determination of the subject.

The idea that cognition is in the service of the subject’s self-determination offers an elegant interpretation to the first of the Hegelian claims that I introduced in Part I. Hegel says, to recall, that self-consciousness is the ground or truth of consciousness. Self-consciousness is the *ground* of consciousness in the sense that the purpose of self-consciousness, self-determination, determines the purpose of consciousness, conceiving of reality as external and heterogeneous to—or separate from—the self-conscious individual.

Next, self-consciousness is the *truth* of consciousness in both the ontological and epistemic senses of the formula “X is the truth of Y”. Ontologically speaking, self-consciousness is the truth of consciousness in the same manner that the body is the truth of the hand. Consciousness would not have been what it is—namely, a certain conception of reality—if not for what self-consciousness is. Both self-consciousness and consciousness are purposive, namely, determined according to an essential purpose, but the purpose of one constitutes the purpose of the other. Epistemically speaking, *qua* consciousness the individual takes herself to know something with certainty, namely, that reality is external and separate. But this certainty is sustained by the tacit or implicit operation of the individual *qua* self-consciousness; only given this operation can we fail to acknowledge its constitutive role in sustaining our knowledge of reality as having a certain character. By analogy, since a hand is an
organ of a properly developed body—hence differentiated from other organs—we could mistakenly believe that the hand is independent of the body. Hence self-consciousness is the (epistemic) truth of consciousness in the sense that the former’s smooth operation makes us ignorant of its role in sustaining the conception of reality that we have *qua* consciousness.

The analogy to a hand and its truth or ground, the body, is admittedly partial. After all, even if a proper body *allows* us to ignore its role in the existence of the hand and our ability to know it, it does not *necessitate* such ignorance. But Hegel offers more apt analogies. To begin with, consider his account in the *Philosophy of Right* of the individual’s operation in the economic market. Hegel argues that individuals are furthering the interest of society at large—say, extending its overall wealth—by focusing on their *self*-interest, ignoring or bracketing the universal interest. In this case, society is the ground of the individual in the sense that the individual serves the universal end even if she does not knowingly pursues it (PhR §184Z). In general, the idea of a subject who acts on a certain end, and thereby realizes another end that he is ignorant of—indeed, of which he *must* be ignorant—is quite basic to Hegel’s understanding of historical progress. The key concept is the “cunning or reason”, namely, the idea that subjects fulfill the ends of reason though they themselves are convinced that they are doing something very different. In the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, for example, Hegel says that the reader has this cunning when he observes a “[specific] determination [...] living its concrete life in the belief that it is promoting its own particular interests and self-preservation, while actually doing the opposite, namely, dissolving itself into a moment of the
Furthermore, this connection between self-consciousness and consciousness is also apparent in Hegel’s construal of the latter in the *Encyclopedia*. He characterizes consciousness as “pure abstract freedom for itself” that “discharges from itself its determinacy, the soul’s natural life, to an equal freedom as an independent object” (E3 §413). This formulation brings together the arguments advanced in Parts 3 and 4—on the deficiency of nature and on abstract self-consciousness. In line with the current part, Hegel calls consciousness “abstract freedom” and says that the object has an “equal freedom”; in line with the previous part, he says that this freedom is actualized by negating or “discharging” the individual’s life-world. Moreover, he adds that the subject herself is aware "of this object, as external to it", while the subject's “identity” with this object is "implicit", that is, not something the subject is aware of.

Admittedly, my claim about consciousness is totally absent from Hegel’s discussion in the first part of the 1807 *Phenomenology*. At no point does Hegel say that consciousness is free or that freedom constitutes its operation. Yet, recall my argument in Part 2. We can expect nothing else, since Hegel describes the experience there from the point of view of the subject, who at this point is still ignorant of the deep structure that explains his experience. Moreover, he must be so ignorant just in order to fulfill the end he unknowingly pursues. But even in the 1807 *Phenomenology*, in the Preface, we find the following assertion: “we take up the movement of the whole at the point where the negation of existence as such is no longer necessary.” (PhG ¶30) The phenomenological progression, then, already
presupposes a prior operation of the subject that consists in negating his concrete existence, his life-world. It is this prior negation, I suggest, that explains the purpose or point of taking the object to be independent of—and separate from—the subject.

Finally, my claim about consciousness is buttressed once we juxtapose it against Hegel’s immediate philosophical heritage. I believe that Hegel takes the idea I am attributing to him, namely, that consciousness is an aspect of the subject’s striving to self-determination, from his reading of Fichte. In his Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Hegel credits Fichte with the following idea: it is a necessary moment in actualizing my freedom that “I posit myself as not posited,” [ich setze mich als nicht gesetzt] as Hegel puts it (LHP 232). This formulation seems paradoxical unless we differentiate moments of consciousness, making room for the idea of a conscious yet partly unconscious operation. The subject, of course, cannot be aware or conscious that she is positing herself as not-posited, lest she would not be able to see the object as something other to her, namely, as not posited. In order to make sense of this paradoxical formulation, then, we must accept the idea that the subject could actualize her freedom even when she is not aware—and must not be aware—that it is the case.

And indeed, a bit later in his lecture on Fichte Hegel says: “in ordinary consciousness, I do not know that in theoretical consciousness I also function as active, as determining. Only the philosophical consciousness knows this” (LHP 234). In other words, the ordinary individual, in his cognitive capacity—entertaining a certain conception of reality—is not aware of his own role in generating this conception. It is the philosopher who can point it out. And this, I suggest, is what my
claim about consciousness precisely does—making explicit the role of the individual’s striving to self-determination in generating his conception of reality.

**Conclusion**

This chapter started off with a hypothesis. I proposed that an adequate understanding of Sense Certainty requires attention to what I called the “ethical basis” of the cognitive subject in the beginning of the *Phenomenology*. In Part 2, I offered another hypothesis, namely, that Sense Certainty captures modern intuitions about the nature of reality and knowledge. It is because we, modern readers, identify with the subject of Sense Certainty, that we get on board the pedagogical process that is the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The conjunction of both these hypotheses amounts to the following idea: the “ethical basis” of Sense Certainty bears important similarities to the modern ethical order:

Reading the transition from the Anthropology to the Phenomenology in the *Encyclopedia*, Parts 3 and 4 reconstructed the ethical basis of sense certainty. My account of the transition proceeded from two premises about what, according to Hegel, a human being is. First, a human being is a natural creature who develops according to an organic concept or “substance”, thereby realizing his “natural individuality” or “bodiliness” and comes to have a life-world. Second, a human being is a spiritual creature, thereby striving to realize the essence of Spirit, self-determination, by actualizing his capacity for self-consciousness.

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73 I take these two premises to explicate what Hegel calls, in the *Encyclopedia*, the “two presuppositions of
Now, the human individual’s commitment to realizing his freedom as self-determined (in line with the first premise) makes him abstract from—negate or reject—his given dependence (in line with the first premise) on his life-world. The first moment in this “liberation” is the representation of the individual’s world as other to him, namely, causing a rupture in the anthropological “child-like unity with the world.” A problem then arises: The individual, actualizing his self-determination, is faced with a world that determines him from outside, thereby defeating the point of the rupture. In response, I suggested, the individual represents the world not only as other but also as independent, namely, as forcing itself on the subject’s consciousness. No matter what the subject were to do, the world would still be there; hence the subject is not responsible, as it were, for this external determination. The world is independent of the subject’s activity. This feature of the object makes it the case that the subject cannot be conscious of his own contribution to this conception. For, if the object—the way he sees the world—is dependent on his own self-determination, then the object doesn’t, after all, determine him from outside. Therefore, the striving of the human individual to realize his spiritual purpose, self-determination, in conjunction with the fact that he is shaped as a member of a life-world, explains his conception of this life-world, namely, as independent of—and heterogeneous to—him.

We appreciate the point or purpose of sense certainty—representing its content, what it is conscious of, as an object independent of the subject—once we see how it serves a more basic purpose, namely, proving the self-determination of
the subject. Unlike organisms in general, the human individual is conscious of himself as self-determined, hence he must be conscious of his life-world as other to him. It is this consciousness of one's life-world as other to one, which is sense certainty. Importantly, however, sense certainty is not a static condition; it is a task. Only by demonstrating that the content of consciousness is an independent object—that is, only by knowing it as such—can the task of establishing the subject's self-determination make progress.

I should acknowledge, in closing, that there is a tension between the first and the second halves of the chapter. Both, to be sure, discuss sense certainty (and this is the reason they constitute a single chapter). However, the dialectic between self-determination and consciousness of an object (described in the second half of the chapter) is not unique to modernity. For Hegel, it operates in any well-functioning, adult human individual. And still, in the first half of the chapter I suggested—and Hegel himself suggests in the Enlightenment section of the *Phenomenology*—that sense certainty has special relevance to modernity.

The next chapters settle this tension. While all human individuals have a capacity for self-determination, in modernity—given the shape personhood takes within civil society—this capacity is actualized to an unprecedented degree.
Chapter II

**Personal Freedom, Sense Certainty, and Ordinary Skepticism**

In a few dense paragraphs in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel identifies a number of social, political and religious conditions that characterize modern Europe starting with the Renaissance. He stresses the rise of personal freedom much as social arrangements that allow and even encourage persons to realize themselves in the economic, cultural and religious spheres. The location of these paragraphs, prior to his treatment of modern philosophy, suggests that Hegel takes these ethical conditions to have an explanatory role with respect to this broad philosophical outlook. It is my goal in this chapter to offer such an explanation. I will argue that personal freedom indeed accounts for a key feature of modern philosophy, namely, its assumption that the cognitive subject is separated from the object that he seeks to know, or in Hegel’s words: “thinking at this stage arises essentially as something subjective in such a way that it has an antithesis in being in general” (LHP 107).

After explicating (in Part 1) Hegel’s conception of personal freedom, I argue (in Part 2) that personal freedom commits the subject to a specific conception of reality—namely, as a potential sphere for realizing his freedom. Roughly, since personal freedom is utterly arbitrary, the person must represent reality in such a
form so that it would not place any normative constraints on his will. This argument
draws on a Hegelian distinction between two sorts of externality. While any item of
content (*Inhalt*; what the subject is conscious of) is external to a subject in the sense
that the item and the subject have different properties, it can still be internal to the
subject in the sense that their interaction realizes a subjectively essential purpose.
When I later argue that the person conceives of reality as *utterly* external, I mean it
in the second sense: the person represents reality as external to him because
otherwise it entails that he is committed to a purpose—and this would be at odds
with personal freedom.

In Part 3, I offer a reading of Sense Certainty, the first chapter of the
*Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which I show that the person's conception of reality
necessarily leads to skepticism about the very ability to know. Any claim that an
object obtains independently of the subject, must involve a synthesis of impressions
from the object in distinct times, namely, the application of a (conceptual) norm. Yet,
the subject would not be able to count such a claim as knowledge, for it falls short of
reality considered as utterly external. Since personal freedom is conditioned on
knowing items as utterly external, this failure also leads to skepticism about the
reality of personal freedom—for freedom is not real insofar as it is not *realized*, that
is, on and in (utterly) external reality. However, that personal freedom is untenable
as a *theoretical view* about the nature of freedom (and reality) is not to say that it is
not stable as an *ethical standpoint*. I argue that, insofar as modernity embodies
personal freedom in social, cultural and religious institutions, it allows and even
encourages the modern individual to stick to his self-conception as a person, despite
the theoretical shortcomings of this view.

PART 1: The Emergence of Modern Personal Freedom

Shortly before he addresses modern philosophy in the Lectures Hegel describes the ethical conditions in Western Europe as they emerge the late Middle Ages. “[T]he political order,” he says (LHP 69), “has become more rigid [füester], which leads to the founding of a self-standingness [Selbständigkeit]” and to an antithesis with “the principle of the church, the principle of selflessness [Selbstlosigkeit].” While Hegel does not use the term “personality” [Persönlichkeit] but rather the less specific “subjective freedom” [subjektive Freiheit], it seems clear that he has the former in mind. For, he does discuss three ways in which this freedom is realized in the lives of individuals and embodied in social institutions—all in line with his depiction of personal freedom in the Philosophy of Right. First and most importantly, he identifies this subjective freedom with a legal right [Recht] to property, the paradigmatic way in which personal freedom is recognized.74 Second, Hegel says that this new sort of freedom makes it possible for people to determine themselves as abstract individuals, that is, over and beyond the determinate properties that they exhibit in virtue of their birth or social affiliation. Third, he stresses that this subjective freedom is realized in “business and commerce,” that is, the economic sphere or civil society (LHP 69-70). In Hegel’s account of Ethical Life [Sittlichkeit], civil society—of which the economic market is a part—is the sphere where individuals conceive of

74 Moral freedom—similarly to personal freedom—is coupled with subjective self-standingness and discussed in the Philosophy of Right. It goes, however, far beyond asserting ownership, and its governing norms are normally not expressed in—or sanctioned by—the legal code.
themselves as persons.

The current Part offers an explication of personal freedom according to Hegel’s account in the *Philosophy of Right*, so that we could later appreciate its role in the rise of modern philosophy. I first focus on personal freedom as a view about the nature of freedom, and then move to discuss the conditions that make this view *actual* in the lives of modern individuals starting with the Renaissance. There are institutions in place, I argue, which make it the case that ordinary individuals conceive of themselves as persons in a way that underscores their actions and beliefs.

**What Is Personal Freedom?**

Like other conceptions of practical freedom that Hegel treats in the *Philosophy of Right*, personal freedom is a specification of Hegel’s most general concept of freedom, namely, self-determination. Most generally, a subject is free if and only if he is the ground of his own properties or determinations. As particular or individual subjects, this definition poses a problem for us, since we are confronted with a world that seems to determine us from outside. That I have blue eyes, or even the fact that I am a student, is hardly something I determine, or at least not something that I fully determine. Hegel’s more specific conceptions of practical freedom offer different ways to respond to this problem. Each specifies grounds for subjective identification with items in the world—an act of will that makes them *self*-determinations, and the world that contains them—the subject’s world. In the case of personal freedom, the

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ground for identification is nothing beyond the subject’s particular will. One is free insofar as one simply chooses to identify with items. This makes this freedom (1) immediate [unmittelbar], (2) arbitrary or exercised by an arbitrary will [Willkür] and (3) abstract [abstrakt]. While I take these three features to be ultimately identical (if one is immediately free, one is also arbitrarily and abstractly free, and vice versa), they still offer distinct perspectives on personal freedom, so it is instructive to discuss them in turn.

**Personal Freedom Is Immediate**

Personal freedom, Hegel says, is (1) “in the determinate condition of immediacy” (PhR §34), that is, the realization of personal freedom is not mediated by any norm; or in other words, insofar as I am a person there is no norm that I ought to follow. To put it colloquially, I am free if I do what I feel like doing. This seems to be at odds with Hegel’s claim that there is a “commandment” [Rechtsgebot] proper to personal freedom, namely, “be a person and respect others as persons” (PhR §36). However, Hegel also says that “there are only prohibitions of right [Rechtsverbote]” (PhR §38). It follows that the commandment to be a person (and respect others as such) is a prohibition. How does a prohibition differ from the other sort of norms, those which the person is allegedly not committed to?

There is a familiar social philosophical distinction that I find helpful in clarifying the concept of prohibition, namely, the distinction between respect and esteem. I will briefly present it so we could see how it applies to my argument.
Axel Honneth, in *The Struggle for Recognition*, distinguishes between two different notions of regard to persons, namely, between “legal recognition” and “social regard”, or, as I prefer to call it, between respect and esteem. Respect is the attitude any person deserves just in virtue of being a legal person, whereas esteem is that which some individuals enjoy in virtue of their particular achievements. Drawing on Rousseau, Frederick Neuhouser suggests thinking of such achievements as *excellences*, that is, ways in which an individual “stands out from his fellow beings and elicits their praise and admiration.” There are almost a limitless variety of excellences, including particular achievements, natural abilities, cultivated talents, and even innate characteristics, such as having beautiful eyes. He adds that moral attributes might also count as excellences, e.g., living a morally exemplary life, “but here, too, esteem is accorded on the basis of particular achievements.” Obviously, not every particular feature of a person (or some persons) counts as an excellence, and what counts as one differs given different social and cultural contexts. For, something counts as an achievement or as an excellence only if there is some degree to which it is socially relevant.

Respect (or legal recognition) is, by contrast, fixed and equal, that is, every person deserves it and it does not accommodate degrees (one is not more or less a person). It corresponds to an essential property of any person whatsoever and hence should be granted regardless of particular achievements and abilities. Thus, as

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77 Ibid., 111-112.
78 Neuhouser (2010), 63.
79 Honneth (1995), 111.
Stephen Darwall says, we can (and should) respect a person, even if we have no esteem for her, that is, even if we do not see her as possessing any worthy particular features. Honneth argues that this concept is peculiarly modern because it is structurally bound with modern law's form of legitimation. Since modern law is legitimate only if it would win the free approval of its subjects, we have to assume that these subjects "have at least the capacity to make reasonable, autonomous decisions regarding moral questions." It explains why the essential quality of a person, the one for which she deserves respect, is not some biological or physical property but rather a moral capacity, that which allows her to exercise moral agency. Following Kant, we can think of it as a person's being free and rational.

But how does respecting a person manifest itself? In the first place, it excludes treatments like "manipulation, degradation, exploitation, disregarding the wishes of others without reason—in short, all forms of dehumanization," says Neuhouser. John Rawls—interpreting the Kantian idea of a person being an "end in itself"—says that it commits us to justify any constraint on a person's action by appealing to principles she herself, if free and rational, would affirm. A different, albeit related, way to think of what respect consists in is by considering the conditions under which one can exercise free and rational agency. Honneth argues that the understanding of these conditions has changed over time. "[D]uring the last few centuries," he writes, "the enrichment of the legal status of the individual citizen

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80 Darwall (1977), 36ff.
82 Neuhouser (2010), 62.
was accompanied by the successive expansion of the core constellation of capacities that constitutively characterize a human being as a person.” While it was first understood to imply only basic rights and liberties which are necessary for deliberation (such conditions correspond, roughly, to points made by Rawls or Neuhouser above), some thinkers now understand these conditions as consisting, also, in some basic standard of living and basic relevant cultural education. To respect a person, then, sometimes implies affording her those further conditions of agency.

Now, it is probably clear that I understand “respect”—as it figures in Hegel’s commandment—along the lines of Honneth’s “legal recognition.” Like legal recognition, I take Hegel’s interpersonal respect to have the following two features. First, it applies to every person and to an equal degree, and second, it is manifested practically. Thus, even when respect is taken to demand a positive action (that is, not merely avoiding a humiliating deed), it is action which is demanded, rather than, say, a positive attitude or feeling. (To be sure, it seems that in some of the accounts that Honneth alludes to, the scope of required action is much broader, e.g., in accounts of respect that require political institutions to secure a minimal standard of living for every person. In Abstract Right, the action required in respecting a person seems much more minimal, or rather: it mostly consists in avoiding action—paradigmatically actions that violate one’s property rights.)

However, there is a further feature of Hegel’s personal respect that remains implicit (if not ambiguous) in Honneth’s and Neuhouser’s discussions—a feature

84 Honneth (1995), 117.
which is most pertinent for my argument. This feature concerns what we might call the *logic* of personal respect, or rather—the nature of the relation between being a person and respecting others as persons. This relationship is clearly different when esteem is concerned. Enjoying esteem—being an esteemed subject—presupposes (1) a commitment to a set of norms articulating what counts as valuable in a definite cultural context and (2) esteem directed at the people who esteem me. If I enjoy esteem as a piano player, I must be committed to the norm, say, that piano playing is good, and esteem others as knowledgeable and tasteful about piano playing. Let us say, then, that the norm that piano playing is good is *internal* to my being esteemed, and that esteeming others is *internal* to my being esteemed. Or, to put it in Hegelian parlance, my being esteemed is *mediated* by a set of norms and mutual recognition on the basis of these norms.

I can now return to Hegel’s commandment of right. This commandment is a prohibition, I suggest, precisely because personality, for Hegel, is *not* so normatively or recognitively mediated, that is, there is no essential relationship between being a person and respecting others as persons. Personal freedom is immediate in the sense that it is not so mediated. Rather, I remain a person—having personal freedom—even if I don’t respect others as persons, or for that matter, even if there are no other persons in the world. A norm that is essentially bound with freedom would be a positive norm, while a norm that is not so bound is a negative norm or a prohibition.

The relationship between personal freedom and respect to other persons, therefore, is not essential or constitutive but something we may call prudential. In
order to actualize myself as a person in the world—realize my “abstract right”—I must respect the equal right of others. To see what I mean, consider what is necessary for a subject if he is to exist in the world as a person. He must have access to food, drink, shelter, and so on. This is one reason why Hegel takes personal freedom to be connected with the person’s having a sphere of items that provide him with such goods, that is, a sphere of private property. Furthermore, given that there are other persons in the world, who are concerned with realizing their own personal freedom, this personal sphere of property is stable and reliable only if there is an authority that secures it, that is, recognizes the person’s right for his property and takes measures to protect it vis-à-vis the claims of other persons. Therefore, being a person—that is, concretely existing in the world—is coupled with respecting the right of others to realize their own personhood. It follows, inter alia, that if a person takes possession of an item but it already belongs to another, the item would not be recognized as his property. Similarly, the claim would not be recognized if the person did not follow conventional procedures for claiming an item as his property. In one community one may be required to cultivate a piece of land for two years in order to be recognized at its owner; in another ethical context, it might suffice to place a flag on the desired grounds. While “be a person and respect others as persons” is a norm that applies to any context of personal freedom, there are more specific norms that vary from one context to another. However, they are all ultimately “prohibitions”, because even “the positive form of commandments of right is, in its ultimate content, based on prohibition” (PhR §38). That is, they are necessary in order to maintain a freedom that negates any norm.
Such construal of the commandment of right observes a necessary distinction between Abstract Right and the second chapter of the Philosophy of Right, Morality, where Hegel puts forth a much thicker notion of mutual recognition. “In connection with formal right,” Hegel says,

we noted that it contained only prohibitions, and that an action strictly in keeping with right consequently had a purely negative determination in respect of the will of others. In morality, on the other hand, the determination of my will with reference to the will of others is positive—that is, the will which has being in itself in inwardly present in what the subjective will realizes. (PhR §112Z).

In light of my interpretation, I understand this “positive reference” as an essential or constitutive relationship between being a moral subject and recognizing others as subjects. Thus, I am a moral subject—realizing my moral freedom—only if I am able to justify my actions by reasons that others would accept upon reflection. Therefore, again, one could not be a moral subject if one failed to recognize others as moral subjects. Reasons, the ground of moral freedom, essentially appeal to other rational or moral subjects and to a set of norms that we share with them (what Hegel calls “the will which has being in itself”)—similarly to the relation between being esteemed, on the one hand, and having others one esteem and a set of shared standards, on the other.

To sum up this discussion, personal freedom is immediate in the sense that being a person, being personally free, is not bound with any essential norm. Insofar as there is a multiplicity of persons, they recognize that, in order to actualize their freedom, they must respect the equal right of all persons to do so. Yet, this idea—
articulated by the “commandment of right”—is a prohibition since it remains “external” to personality. I am required to not violate the rights of others, but I am not required to take their point of view into consideration, e.g., by justifying my actions and beliefs in terms we all share.85

**Personal Freedom Is Arbitrary and Abstract**

The argument so far should already show us why personal freedom is (2) arbitrary; or, to use another of Hegel’s formulations, personal will is purely *resolving* [beschließend], taking decisions arbitrarily. Personal freedom is arbitrary because being a person—realizing personal freedom—is not conditioned on following any norm. The person may choose to follow norms, or choose not to. He may even choose to follow a specific norm at noontime and change his mind by the late afternoon. This would not make him any less (personally) free, since his being free is just a matter of identifying with external items arbitrarily, uncommitted to any norm that could lend consistency or prudence to his conduct. To be sure, many persons may be consistent or prudent. After all, in order to exist as person—realize their freedom in the world vis-à-vis other persons and political authorities—they should better be consistent insofar as it serves their survival. It would not be very useful—or even quite dangerous—to buy a home in the morning (say with a the norm in mind that buying a home is good for survival) and set it on fire by lunchtime. Yet,

85 Allan Wood (1990), 81-91, traces the justification of the commandment of right to the master and bondsman dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where Hegel describes the process that culminates in what he calls “mutual recognition.” This risks confounding personal respect with moral recognition. If anything, I believe that the (very limited) level of recognition in Abstract Right is more akeen to the manner in which the bondsman recognizes the master.
this in itself does not violate personal freedom, and a person would still be a person even if he took such odd and dangerous measures.

Therefore, the arbitrariness of personal freedom does not entail that the person cannot exhibit properties like prudence or consistency. The relevant contrast is not between arbitrariness and inconsistency (or imprudence) but rather between arbitrariness and rationality. Personal freedom is not rational, insofar as we define rationality as commitment to an essential norm, a norm that is essential to the identity of the subject. A rational subject—in virtue of his identity as rational—is essentially committed to norms that articulate what is rational; these norms serve as a standard that governs the subject’s conduct. By contrast, if the person is consistent or prudent (in the sense of appearing to follow a rational norm), it is not in virtue of his freedom but in virtue of external conditions that force him to act in this manner. Therefore, he may (arbitrarily) choose at any point to be imprudent or inconsistent. Since the person is not rational, ideas like “the good” or “the freedom of others” are not in themselves reasons for him to act in a certain manner; only if he chooses to, and he could just as well choose not to.

The third property of personal freedom is its being (3) abstract—and this has at least two interrelated senses. First, as a person, one’s freedom is not determined by—or conditioned on following—any norm, hence this freedom is indeterminate or abstract. Second, since the sort of mediation that a person lacks is rational mediation—that is, mediation in virtue of the subject’s identity—personal freedom is abstract in the sense that its subjects—persons—are abstract. A person has no determinate identity in virtue of which he is free—not even the bare (and quite
empty) identity as a rational subject. Nor is he free *qua* father or *qua* carpenter—identities that would provide him with norms that are essential to his identity. To be sure, a person may have one or more “identities” in the sense in which we nowadays sometimes (at least in a liberal context) use this term. He may be a man, gay, father, American, and so on. Yet, these identities are not essential to who he is, and he can choose to identify with them or reject them. Therefore, while at least some of these identities obviously do commit one to certain norms in specific communities (say, to take care of your children if you’re a father), following these norms is not essential to who the person is, because these identities are not essential to who he is. The person, rather, is abstract—a human being in general—over and beyond any particular identity, and therefore no such identity places him under rational norms. To formulate it in yet another way: the second sense in which personal freedom is abstract, is that it is the freedom of abstract subjects whom Hegel deems “persons”.

To make the notion of personal freedom clearer, consider briefly Hegel’s two other conceptions of practical freedom in the *Philosophy of Right*. According to moral freedom, one is free only if one conducts oneself in accordance with one’s conception of the good, a conception that includes the good of others as well. It is essential to one’s identity as a (morally) free subject, that one must realize a conception of the universal good. Because the moral subject is committed to a norm, his freedom is mediated and determinate, and because this norm is essential to his identity, his freedom is rational rather than arbitrary. He cannot (arbitrarily) choose to abstain from this norm, on pain of losing his status as a (morally) free subject.
only if one follows the norms of one’s community in virtue of one’s membership in this community. This conception of freedom is even more mediated, rational, and determinate, both because there are many more norms that mediate one’s freedom in virtue of one’s identity, and because the content of these norms is more determinate or specific (they give, for example, a specification to the universal good, what it entails here and now). To be sure, these brief explications hardly do justice to the complexity of conceptions of freedom at stake, but I am only interested in using them to articulate the distinctiveness of personal freedom.

The Ethical Actuality of Personal Freedom

Hegel traces the emergence of personal freedom to the Roman Empire, in which citizens were legally recognized as possessing an absolute right on their person.86 Why, then, am I offering personal freedom as a conception of freedom that should partly explain a typically modern philosophical outlook? I shall argue, in response, that in modern Europe personal freedom is embodied in social and cultural institutions to a much bigger extent than in Rome. To begin with, personal freedom is increasingly bound with a right to property.87 As part of it, personal freedom is not only formally recognized but also realized in the economic, cultural and even religious spheres. To this extent, personal freedom is more actual in modernity—in the sense that a self-conception as personally free informs the actions and beliefs of

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86 Hegel (1956), 340.
87 Cf. PhR §62R: “It must be nearly one and a half millennia since the freedom of personality began to flourish [...] But it is only since yesterday, so to speak, that the freedom of property has been recognized here and there as a principle.”
ordinary individuals. In the following I will discuss three respects in which personal freedom is stronger or more actual in modernity. It is (1) realized in the economic and cultural spheres; (2) it is secured and actively promoted by strong political authorities; and (3) it receives “confirmation” in the form of the Protestant Reformation.

First, personal freedom is stronger in modernity since it is not only formally recognized by law but also realized in the economic and cultural spheres. “Bit by bit,” Hegel says, “the civic and legal order and its freedoms emerge, with business, commerce, and the arts all playing their parts” (LHP 70). Insofar as personal freedom is not only a legal right but receives social space in which it can be realized with little interference, then it is stronger and explains why, in turn, individuals would be more confident in their self-conception as persons. As Hegel puts it, “[p]eople have reached the point of knowing themselves to be free and of getting their freedom recognized; they have reached the point of seeing that it lies in their hands, that they have the strength to act in their own interests and for their own purposes” (ibid.). By contrast, in the Roman Empire, much as personal freedom was legally recognized, the ethical order is characterized by political authorities that exercise their power in “increasingly monstrous proportions” (PhR §357). In such conditions, I take it, much as (some) individuals formally possess property rights, the ability to rely on their property as stable, let alone increase their property and assert their freedom in the social realm is very limited.

And this brings me to the second ethical condition that buttresses personal freedom in modernity, namely, the fact that there is a stronger—and, more
importantly, rational — social order that supports it. As Hegel puts it, again in relation to the character of modern philosophy, “worldly relationships have organized themselves in a way that is compatible with the nature of things, that is rational. This universal nexus [...] is so powerful that every individual is part of it” (LHP 110). When Hegel refers to an ethical order as rational, it means inter alia that it is an order that allows individuals to realize their freedom, and this includes what Hegel calls “the administration of justice”. Especially in the economic sphere, where individuals are overly focused on their own personal interests—in line with their self-conception as persons—there need be authorities in place that would settle confrontations between individuals and alleviate phenomena like crime and extreme poverty. By contrast, Hegel depicts persons in the Roman ethical order as subject to arbitrary—namely, non-rational—political power, and mentions the emergence of a “corrupt rabble” [Pöbel], masses of poor individuals that are incapable of asserting their personal freedom, even if it is formally recognized by law. Therefore, the availability of strong and rational authorities that administer justice make personal freedom in modernity much more stable and widespread.

The third ethical condition that makes personal freedom more actual, starting with the Renaissance, is the religious doctrine advanced by the Protestant Reformation. In the Lectures, Hegel discusses Protestant doctrine after his description of the economic and political conditions that I just laid out. He says that the Reformation was the “confirmation” [Bewährung] of a “valid subjectivity” [Geltendes Subjektiven] that was already at place in the social and economic sphere. To see the ethical significance of the Reformation, it is helpful to contrast it with the
Catholic world of the Middle Ages. Hegel depicts the catholic believer’s relationship with religious practice as “external” [äußerlich]. Like in other instances, Hegel uses an animal to make a point about less (or non) free people. He says that in medieval Catholicism, “the host is venerated even as an external thing, so if it has been eaten by a mouse, both the mouse and its excrement are to be venerated” (LHP 47). That is, religious practice is considered virtuous regardless of how the subject of this practice inwardly feels about it, or whether she can justify it or not. It follows that religious virtuosity can be the result of mere discipline or obedience to Church authorities, since it suffices that the believer would behave in a certain manner—regardless of her inner attitude—to count as virtuous. This is the reason, I take it, that Hegel identifies medieval Church with a “principle of selflessness,” for the self-standingness or independent authority of the individual—what she feels or thinks about her practice—does not matter from a religious point of view.

Based on this contrast with medieval Catholicism, I take the Reformation to actualize personal freedom in two interrelated respects. First, if the individual is required to inwardly identify with religious actions and beliefs, she must entertain a self-conception of herself as self-standing or independent, that is, in line with personal freedom. Only if she can take a reflective distance from the dictates of external authority, and then choose a given belief or a purpose—because she wants to and not because she is forced to—would such a choice constitute the required identification. So the first respect in which the Reformation actualizes personal freedom is that it makes the utter normative independence of the person not only

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88 In Part 3, I discuss another instance of this sort.
legitimate, a matter of legal right or permissibility, but an “absolute duty” (LHP 95). Secondly, insofar as the Reformation encourages the individual to know her actions and beliefs as hers—as bound with inner identification—it extends beyond the religious sphere and legitimizes exercises of freedom in the economic and cultural spheres. By contrast, since medieval Catholicism was based on external obedience, it would tend to conceive of worldly personal endeavors—uncalled for by the Church—as potentially sinful. Hegel says that the Reformation is a Bewährung of prior ethical conditions, and while I translated it above to “confirmation” this hardly captures another sense, namely, “parole”. The second respect in which the Reformation makes personal freedom more actual, then, is that it removes the air of sinfulness that personal endeavors in the social sphere used to carry in the medieval context.89

To conclude, personal freedom in modernity is not just a conception of freedom—a theoretical view that could be entertained and discussed only in academic or philosophical contexts. Nor is it only a legal framework whose realization in the lives of individuals is hindered by repressive political authorities. Rather, personal freedom starting with the Renaissance is an entrenched ethical standpoint; it is embodied in social institutions and informs the way in which ordinary individuals conceive of themselves and their practice. While I mentioned above the Protestant “doctrine” or “religious idea”, the Reformation had its

89 To be sure, by making individual freedom into a duty, rather than just a right, the Reformation does not only confirm personal freedom but goes beyond it; indeed, it sets the basis for moral freedom. After all, personal freedom includes only “prohibitions” rather than positive norms or duties. However, since this chapter focuses on personal freedom—rather than other conceptions of freedom that arise in modernity—I will not elaborate on this positive side.
tremendous ethical impact because it gave rise to a manifold of social institutions and widely circulated texts. Thanks to such conditions, these religious ideas were instilled in the minds and hearts of European individuals. Hegel stresses, in this respect, the importance of Luther’s translation of the Bible into German, and more generally, the fact that the individual believer’s native tongue is from now on the language of religious practice (LHP 97).

PART 2: The Person and His Otherness

Having discussed the idea and the ethical actuality of personal freedom, I can move to my claim that the person—or the (personally) free subject—is necessarily committed to a specific conception of what is different from him. We can begin by noting an obvious fact. The person, existing as an individual human being, is necessarily related to numerous, if not an infinite number, of items in the world surrounding him. As Hegel says, “as this person I am something wholly determinate: I am of such an age, of such a height, in this room, and whatever other particularities [Partikularitäten] I happen to be“ (PhR §35Z). It is clear from Hegel’s characterization of personal freedom, that it entails a specific conception of these items. The subject, insofar as he conceives of his freedom as immediate, abstract and arbitrary (i.e., as personal), would represent items as (utterly) external and non-conceptual. I will explain these interrelated features in turn, showing how they both derive from the concept of personal freedom.

When I say that the person represents items as external, I mean that he must (following from the concept of a person) attribute to them an existence that is
different from—or independent of—the representing thereof. We can say that the representing subject must be different from the item which is the content of this representing, what this representing is about. For, the person is abstract, and there is no item that is essential to what he is. Therefore, if the person is related to a particular item, this item must be other to the person representing him. To be sure, this might sound quite trivial. If I represent an item X, isn't it trivial that X is different from me? Yet, I am not talking about a merely numerical difference; if I am a person, X is not another way to refer to the same reality, but rather refers to another reality. To make this distinction clearer I would like to revisit a point I made in Chapter I, following Sebastian Rödl and Michael Thompson.

Consider the relation between a migratory bird and the decline of temperatures in the end of the European summer. In one obvious sense this natural fact is external to the individual bird but in another sense it is not external. For, a migratory bird would not have been a migratory bird, had it not encountered this condition in permanent intervals. When it encounters it, it is determined to migrate southwards, and there is a sense in which this determination is self-determination, namely, a determination of freedom. To be a migratory bird entails conforming to this norm; this norm is essential to what a migratory bird is. We could think in similar terms about a subject who conceives of himself as a social member in Hegel's sense, a father for instance. Some items, which are external to him in the first

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Note that this does not yet entail that there is also a “representation” involved, that is, yet another term that separates the subject from the item. The subject can be directly representing the item. That there must be a mediating representation would transpire from critically examining this conception of reality—an insight that would amount to skepticism about the ability to know external reality. I will get to it in Part 4.
(obvious) sense, are internal in the second sense. That he is a father is essential to what he is, so acting accordingly is therefore not an external determination but (free) self-determination. Furthermore, we can make a similar point about an object in the subject’s vicinity, perhaps a tree in the garden of the family house. The presence of this tree is part of the habitual life of this father; it bears fruit in the spring and gives shade in the summer. It is part of what it is to be a father, in his case, that this tree is there. Insofar as the presence of this tree determines the father in certain norm-governed ways (cultivate it, consume its fruit), it is not an external determination but, again, self-determination.

Generalizing these examples we get the following distinction between two senses in which an item can be external to a subject, weaker and stronger. First, an item is external to a subject if and only if it has different properties (this is what I called above the “obvious sense”). Second, an item is external to a subject if and only if the interaction between them does not realize a purpose that is essential to the subject. If an item is external only in the weak sense and not in the strong sense, let us say that it is internal to the subject (for the weak sense is of no interest for my argument). In this case there must be a norm that governs the interaction between the subject and the item, since if their interaction is random, there is no sense in which it contributes to realizing a purpose. In following this norm, the subject is (freely) self-determined, for this norm realizes a proper purpose of his.

When I say that the person represents items in the world as external to him, I do not mean it only in the first (obvious) sense, but also in the second sense—that is, he represents them as inessential to the kind of entity that he is, hence as not
necessary for being a person, for realizing his freedom. I would therefore sometimes say that the person takes items to be other to him (in contrast to merely different), or utterly external. Importantly, this means that, insofar as the person represents an item, he must represent it as an external determination, that is, the opposite of (free) self-determination. Only if items are internal can the subject represent his relation to them as self-determination—like the bird relates to the declining temperatures in the end of the European summer.

In his discussion of personal freedom in Abstract Right, Hegel frequently uses terms that convey the fact that items are other or utterly external to the free subject, and relates this feature of items to the subject’s self-conception as (personally) free. The person “as exclusive individuality [...] encounters [...] content as an external world immediately confronting it” (PhR §34), he says, and adds a bit later that “[t]he resolving and immediate individuality of the person relates itself to a nature which it encounters before it” (PhR §39). Given my explication of the otherness, or externality, of items, we can see why relating to them would be, in Hegel’s terms, an “immediate” relation. To recall, if a subject is to be related to an item internal to him, then there must be a norm that mediated this relation. Without such a norm a subject can only relate to items immediately, that is, as other to him or utterly external.

Next, if the person immediately relates to an item, then the item must be represented as non-conceptual or as itself “immediate”. Hegel himself does not use the term “non-conceptual” but I believe that, if we have in mind his account of concepts, we can make sense of what he does say. I will begin, then, with a gloss on
Hegel’s understanding of concepts, following Robert Brandom’s interpretation.91

In Brandom’s view, a concept is a norm that determines the conditions under which the application of this concept is appropriate or necessitated, and which further concept-applications the application of this concept allows for or necessitates. To take Brandom’s favorite example, the concept ‘red’ is necessitated if I applied the concept ‘scarlet’ and appropriate if I applied the concept ‘colored’; yet I am precluded from applying ‘red’ if I already applied ‘green’. Once I applied ‘red’, I commit myself to applying the concept ‘colored’ and preclude myself from applying the concept ‘blue’. Similarly, when I apply the concept ‘iron’, I am committed to applying the concept ‘metal’ and the concept ‘chemical element’ and precluded from applying the concept ‘wood’. We can say that a conceptual norm determines the rational or inferential connections between a concept X and other concepts, that is, which concepts could be reasons for inferring the application of X, and to which other applications the application of X would serve as a reason.

According to Brandom, when a subject applies a concept, he binds himself to the norm that articulates the content of this concept; he is thereby responsible to fulfilling the manifold of commitments that the use of this concept involves. Furthermore, fulfilling these commitments is part and parcel of what it is to be a member of a linguistic community. In other words, to be free qua member of a community is to be subject of conceptual commitments or subject to the conceptual norms that articulate them. Being a member of a linguistic community realizes a

91 See, for example (the same account appears in other works), “Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel’s Idealism”, in Brandom (2002).
conception of freedom that Brandom defines as *freedom as constraint by norms*,\(^92\) and insofar as the subject conceives of himself as a member of this community, following such norms is not a limitation of his freedom but rather the way in which his freedom is realized, the way in which he is (freely) self-determined.

Having in mind my distinction above between two senses of externality, Brandom is offering us an idiom for talking about internality (that is, the opposite of strong externality). Thus, according to Brandom’s account of concepts, concepts are internal to their subjects since the interaction between subjects and concepts is norm-governed and realizes a purpose that is essential to these subjects, namely, being members of their community. Note that given Hegel’s broad notion of a concept, we can apply this idiom to the migratory birds as well (or for that matter, to any life form). Since for Hegel—as Thomas Wartenberg maintains—concepts are not necessarily items that are represented by self-conscious subjects,\(^93\) the terms ‘weather condition in the end of the European summer’ and ‘migrating southwards’ could both count as concepts. By relating to the former concept the bird is determined to relate to the latter concept, thereby realizing itself as a member of its life form. However, while this analogy might be helpful for some readers, I would like to focus on the human case. The question is how this account of concepts implies that the person would represent reality as non-conceptual.

The person, given his conception of freedom, cannot acknowledge a norm as

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\(^92\) This is the title of Brandom (1979).

\(^93\) Wartenberg (1993). As I wrote in Chapter I, Wartenberg attributes our difficulty to conceive of concepts as non-represented (by subjects) to the mentalistic bias of modern philosophy. My argument in this chapter and the next one suggests that this “mentalistic bias” is coupled with the rise of personal freedom in modernity.
essentially committing for him; hence he cannot take himself to be applying concepts in Brandom’s sense. The non-conceptuality of items just is their externality, for if the subject does not acknowledge conceptual norms as mediating the relation between him and items—norms that are essential to his identity—then he relates to items as utterly external to him. While Hegel, again, does not use the term “non-conceptuality”, he does say that the person relates to items as immediate and particular, and having the Brandomean story about concepts in place I can now explain these terms. Items are immediate (for the person), in the sense that their identity is not mediated by their relation to other items. By contrast, to represent an item as a concept implies that the item would not have been this item if it were not similar to other items (they all fall under the same concept) and different from others. In a similar vein, a person represents an item as particular, for representing it as a concept (or in Hegel’s term—a “universal”) implies that its identity depends on its similarity to (and difference from) other items.

To be sure, these metaphysical or logical considerations seem to be quite far, to say the least, from the way of thinking of ordinary people. The person is not (necessarily) a philosopher, obviously. However while I acknowledge the fact that personal freedom is first and foremost an ethical standpoint, I am laying out the commitments that logically follow from it. A subject, who conceives of himself as free under this conception, must represent items as particular and immediate, for otherwise he would be committed (by a conceptual norm) to representing other items.

This point may be clearer if we bear in mind that conceptual norms cross
boundaries between theoretical and practical concepts, in the sense that the identity of a concept that typically figures in knowledge-claims, is partly determined by concepts that typically figure in actions. For example, while applying the concept ‘table’ commits the subject to applying the concept ‘furniture’ and precludes him from applying the concept ‘chair’, it also commits the subject to applying action concepts like ‘eating’ or ‘doing homework’ (depending on the sort of table at stake). Therefore, applying a concept binds the subject not only to further knowledge-claims but also to certain ways of handling objects. I hope that this consideration makes my point more concrete, as it were, insofar as it shows that conceptual activity does not only implicate one’s cognition but also one’s practical attitudes.

Having said that, I take it that the (personally) free subject could note the fact the members of a certain community apply concepts according to a set of norms. For example, if they assert that something is a table, they would not try to eat it but only eat on it; nor would they say that something is red and then immediately claim that it is green. If the person wants to function in this community and attain his (personal) goals, he would better learn these rules and follow them. However, it is not to say that he represents these items as concepts in the relevant sense. He first represents them as immediate—that is, as external and non-conceptual—and then does with them whatever he needs to do in order to maintain his status in the community. To make it more concrete: for the person a table is just a table, as it were. It is not a reason to do or say anything further. It is because he (arbitrarily) chooses to abide by a certain communal norm, that he would avoid breaking this table to pieces, rather than using it for a family dinner. By contrast, if the subject
conceived of his freedom as mediated by membership in the community, he would also represent items as mediated—as concepts—that is, as placing him under norms that are essential to this membership. We can say, more generally, that a person may learn the rules of a communal game and join it, yet he could also leave the game whenever he wants to. As a person, his participation in the game is not essential to his freedom but rather an arbitrary exercise of his freedom, and as such he can always desert it. In terms of the previous section, such rules are “prohibitions”; the person would experience them as external limitations on his freedom, and the possibility to violate them would be always present.

I take the idea that items are non-conceptual (from the standpoint of personhood) to figure in Hegel’s following statement. “What is immediately different from the free spirit is,” he says, “the external in general—a thing [Sache], something unfree, impersonal, and without rights.” (PhR §42) In the next paragraph he adds that “[i]t is only these things in their immediate quality, not those determinations they are capable of taking on through the mediation of the will, which are at issue here in connection with personality, which is itself still in its initial immediacy” (PhR §43). In light of Brandom’s account of concepts, we can say that concepts have qualities—or are determined—in virtue of “determinations of the will,” that is, in virtue of the way subjects apply them. The person, then, is a subject who disregards such determinations; and in this sense he represents items as non-conceptual. To be sure, I am not suggesting—following the first quote from Hegel—that concepts are free or have rights. Yet, we can say that concepts are parts of—or internal to—subjective freedom if we conceive of this freedom not as personal freedom but
rather as the freedom of members in a conceptual community. To represent a table as something to which one must relate in definite, norm-governed ways, is part of being a member of a certain community. Think, for example, of the wonder—and sometimes rage—that strangers can invoke if they relate to objects in ways that are not allowed for by the conceptual norms of a certain community. Or even the anxiety that one could experience if one returned home from a vacation and the Airbnb guest seemed to use the coffee table for her dinner and held a party in the kitchen. Such a response goes beyond an obvious anger on the mess left behind, and we can moreover stipulate that the guest did not violate any explicit rules that were relayed to her. Rather, the guest violated the owner’s freedom in the sense that she related to the owner’s objects and space in ways that are at odds with his norm-governed habits. Drawing on this example, I suggest that items are often mediated by "determinations of the will", in the sense they have a role in the lives of subjects, and that a person would ignore such determinations, that is, he would represent items as mere things or as non-conceptual.

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Having discussed the person’s conception of reality, I would like to suggest that the relation between freedom and a specific conception of reality (as external and non-conceptual) is an instance of a more general principle that Hegel formulates in the Encyclopedia, namely, that “the truth of consciousness is self-consciousness and the latter is the ground of the former” (E3 §424). In the previous chapter I argued that this principle articulates a teleological explanation. Self-consciousness explains consciousness—or is the truth or ground thereof—in the sense that the
purpose of consciousness is to realize the purpose of self-consciousness. The subject, in order to realize his self-conception as (abstractly) free, hence as independent of any norm, is conscious of reality as other or external to him, that is, as not committing him to any norm. My account of the relation between personal freedom and its conception of reality exhibits this principle, for the person's conception of reality has been explained as a necessary aspect of the person's realizing his self-conception as (abstractly) free. Let me show how this teleological axis figures in Hegel's discussion in the *Philosophy of Right*.

Thus, opening his account of personal property, Hegel says that “the person must give himself an external sphere of freedom,” and that “because” [weil] the person’s freedom is utterly abstract, “this sphere distinct from the will, which may constitute the sphere of its freedom, is likewise determined as immediately different and separable from it” (PhR §41). Hegel is implying that the otherness of reality is not given but determined, and that this determination somehow follows from personal freedom as such, namely, from its being abstract. In section 14 of the Introduction we find an explanation to this relation between personal freedom and external reality. The resolving will (which is the will of the person—the will that decides by abstracting from any norm), Hegel says, is related to its content

as to the determinations of its nature and of its external actuality [...] To this extent, this content is only a possible one for the reflection of the 'I' into itself; it may or may not be mine; and 'I' is the possibility of determining myself to this or to something else, of choosing between these determinations which the 'I' must in this respect regard as *external*. (PhR §14)
The person, then, represents items as external to him, since this is a condition to regarding them as *mere* possibilities, that is, I suggest, as not placing him under any normative constraints. The externality of the items liberates the person, as it were, to choose arbitrarily to identify with any item that he pleases. Hegel makes a similar point when he says that “[b]y resolving, the will posits itself as the will of a specific individual and as a will which distinguishes itself from everything else”. He adds that this finitude of the will, being in relation to something else, means that it is also “consciousness”, that is, consciousness of something as other to it (PhR §13).

Note that the last point alludes to the general principle that we find in the *Encyclopedia*—that which explains consciousness of otherness as following from (abstractly free) self-consciousness. However, when Hegel discusses the abstract freedom of self-consciousness, it seems that it could be realized by mere negation. That is, the abstractly free subject can realize his abstract freedom by refusing to identify with any item. By contrast, the person is concerned with being a person, that is, identifying with concrete items in the world. In terms introduced above, the person does not only represent items as mere possibilities, but he is pushed to actualize a possibility, give himself a positive determination. Or in Hegel’s words, “[p]ersonality is that which acts to overcome this limitation and to give itself reality—or, what amounts to the same thing, to posit that existence as its own.” (PhR, §39) Therefore, the person is committed to a certain conception of items—as belonging, indeed, to a real world that subsists outside of his subjective will.

If we take seriously the idea that the person’s identification with items is conditioned on a certain conception of reality, we reach the following formula:
An item $X$ is a realization of a person $P$'s freedom if and only if $P$ knows $X$ as utterly external to $P$ and $P$ takes possession of $X$.

The formula employs the verbs "knows" and "takes possession" rather than "represent" and "identify" (as I have mostly done so far), since I would like stress that a realization of personal freedom may either succeed or fail, and both "to know" and "to take possession" [*in Besitz nehmen*] are success verbs. So far I have used more neutral verbs, as the focus was on the person's self-conception and corresponding conception of reality. However, since now the focus shifted to the person's motivation to successfully realize this self-conception in the world, we must have in view the possibility of failure. With regard to the epistemic part of the formula, it implies that a realization of freedom would fail if it fails as a knowledge-claim about the item at stake. I will return to this point in Part 3.

In section 4 of the Introduction Hegel comes very close to the formula I just proposed. Arguing against a common perception, according to which actions and knowledge-claims are realizations of two separate capacities, he says that

[t]he theoretical is essentially contained [*enthalten*] within the practical; the idea [*Vorstellung*] that the two are separate must be rejected, for one cannot have will without intelligence. On the contrary, the will contains the theoretical within itself. The will determines itself, and this determination is primarily of an inward nature, for what I will I represent to myself as my object [*Gegenstand*]. The animal acts by instinct, it is impelled by something inward and is therefore also practical; but it has no will, because it does not represent to itself what it
desires. It is equally impossible to adopt a theoretical attitude or to think without a will, for in thinking we are necessarily active. The content of what is thought certainly takes on the form of being; but this being is something mediated, something posited by our activity. These distinct attitudes are therefore inseparable: they are one and the same thing, and both moments can be found in every activity, of thinking and willing alike” (PhR §4Z)

What makes a human being free, Hegel says, is that he represents to himself what he wills. Furthermore, while both freedom and knowing are present in any determination of the subject, Hegel stresses that “the theoretical is contained in the practical”. It is contained, I suggest, not in the sense that any theoretical attitude is also practical but not vice versa (that is, that the practical includes the theoretical but somehow extends beyond it); rather, it is contained in the sense that only once we have in view the subject’s realization of his freedom, do we understand what cognition is. Cognition is the business of representing the world in a manner that serves the realization of freedom; as I said above, its purpose is to realize the higher purpose of freedom. In the case of personal freedom we get a particular instance of this general connection between freedom and cognition. Thus, insofar as the subject conceives of himself as personally free, he would cognize the world as utterly external to the subject, namely, as non-conceptual. We can infer that a subject who is a member of a conceptual community would strive to represent the world as conceptual, that is, as giving him reasons to make further knowledge-claims and perform actions in relation to others. This would constitute another case in which cognition serves the purpose of freedom, albeit under a different conception, as membership in a community.
Drawing to conclusion, one more necessary point is in order; again revisiting my argument in the previous chapter. The common perception according to which theoretical and practical attitudes are exercises of separate faculties is not a coincidence. In fact, this very separation is necessary in order to realize the subject’s self-conception as (personally) free. Thus, if the person were aware that he was representing reality as utterly external for the sake of realizing his conception of freedom, the activity of representing would not serve its purpose. For, it would then be clear that the person's freedom is not immediate but mediated, that is, essentially committed to a norm-governed activity. Therefore, the person must take reality to be external regardless of his taking it to be so; or in other words, he must be unconscious of the fact that he is essentially invested in this conception of reality. In the previous chapter I cited, in this connection, Hegel’s paradoxical gloss on Fichte: "I posit myself as non posited" [ich setze mich als nicht gesetzt; LHP 232]. Paraphrasing this principle I suggested that the free subject must mediate reality as immediate. In the Philosophy of Right, Hegel alludes to the unconscious nature of the practical element in cognition, when he says that "[t]he content of what is thought certainly takes on the form of being; but this being is something mediated, something posited by our activity." That content takes the "form of being" means that it is represented as immediate, as obtaining regardless of the subject’s activity or mediation; but despite this appearance, Hegel paradoxically adds, this form is the result of subjective activity. The air of paradox is removed once we differentiate between two levels of consciousness. As long as the subject is conscious of otherness, concerned with cognizing it, he is unconscious of the way in which his
freedom informs this activity; indeed, of the sense in which it is an *activity* rather than mere reception of reality as it is regardless of the subject.

The fact that freedom's role in cognition is unconscious offers another sense in which freedom is the truth or ground of cognition. For, when Hegel uses the general formulation 'X is the truth of Y', he does not only mean that the purpose of X explains Y as a realization of this purpose; he also means that we can easily disregard or altogether ignore the role of X. For example, the body is the truth of the hand in the sense that the purpose of the body explains the hand as realizing this purpose. Yet, if the body is well formed we can easily ignore its mediating role; we can rather take the hand as self-sufficient. Similarly, if freedom remains unconscious in the cognitive activity—as it should be for the sake of realizing its purpose—we can easily ignore freedom's mediating role, and conceive of cognition as a separate and independent faculty.

The last point about the separation of practical and theoretical attitudes, that is, about the fact that the role of freedom must remain implicit, should serve as a warning against a simplistic understanding of my argument in this section. I am not claiming that cognition is a tool, as it were, a measure that the subject takes if and when he needs it. This would violate the separation between freedom and cognition since it would make explicit freedom's dependence on cognition. Rather, cognition has a life of its own, as it were; it is exercised independently of freedom but still (and because of that) serves it. Cognition, insofar as it is explained by personal freedom, is concerned with representing a world that is a *potential* space for persons to realize their arbitrary freedom. Hegel seems to allude to the Book of Genesis, when
he cites “the absolute right of appropriation which human beings have over all things” (PhR §44). Employing these terms, we can say that the theoretical side of personhood works to establish a conception of reality as totally at the mercy of persons, as it were.

To conclude this section, I argued that personal freedom commits the subject to representing reality as utterly external to him, and that this activity contributes to realizing personal freedom. Furthermore, insofar as the subject is concerned with realizing his freedom by taking possession of items, he is also concerned with knowing items as real (in the relevant sense). Personal freedom explains a certain world-view, an understanding of reality as a space in which persons can exercise their freedom without normative constraints. I will now argue that this conception of reality leads to skepticism about the very ability to know reality.

**PART 3: The Person as a Skeptic**

In order to see the skepticism inherent in the person’s conception of reality we can follow Hegel’s argument in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology, Sense Certainty*, where Hegel critiques a conception of reality and knowledge which is identical to the person’s. The subject of Sense Certainty, like the person, takes reality to be “there”, immediate and particular, and the cognition thereof as consisting in representing items as real under this conception. Hegel himself points to an explanatory connection between personal freedom and Sense Certainty in an obscure remark in the *Philosophy of Right*. The free will of a person, he says (PhR §44R), “is the truth” of “the so-called philosophy which ascribes reality—in the
sense of self-standingness and genuine being-for-and-in-itself—to immediate individual things, to the non personal realm.” 94 While Hegel clearly thinks that this worldview is mistaken, he offers personal freedom as an explanation for this mistake.

The identity between the person’s conception of reality and that of sense certainty is not a happy coincidence but stems from a basic feature of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. In the previous chapter I argued that, in light of what Hegel tells us about the *Phenomenology*, we must understand the subject of the experience, “consciousness”, as an “abstraction”, which is explained by aspects of its subjectivity that remain implicit or unknown to the subject himself. My argument in the current chapter follows this lead. For, I have shown that a specific conception of freedom commits the subject to a specific conception of reality that overlaps with that of the subject in Sense Certainty. In other words, a key feature of the subject—his conception of reality—is explained in terms of an implicit conception of freedom.

In the current section, Part 3, I offer a reading of Sense Certainty, focusing on the beginning and the end of the experience described there. My goal is to demonstrate how the assumption that the subject of the experience is a person—or committed to personal freedom—explains the subject’s conception of reality and knowing, much as his acceptance of some demands that Hegel (in the voice of the narrator in the chapter) places on knowledge. As a preliminary note, I should say that the interpretation that I offer here by no means supposed to deny the validity of

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94 I modified the translation—rendering Selbständigkeit as self-standingness rather than self-sufficiency. Also in other quotes, I translate this concept either as self-standingness or as independence. Both are better, I find, for capturing the normative aspects of this concept.
some other interpretations. I believe that, given the presuppositions of the argument (sense certainty’s conception of reality, what Hegel calls the “criterion”), in addition to a few reasonable demands (say, that knowledge must be articulated by language), Hegel’s dialectic in Sense Certainty stands on its own feet. My interpretation is unique, though, in that it shows why these presuppositions and assumptions are not “given” or forced on the subject, but are necessary commitments of his, insofar as he is committed to personal freedom.

Let us begin with a brief description of the beginning of the experience in Sense Certainty, the so-called “dialectic of the now”. Shortly after Hegel characterized the subject’s conception of reality, the subject is asked what he knows, what is real for him. “Now is night,” he says. The narrator writes down this report, saying—without an explanation—that “a truth cannot lose anything by being written down.” After a few hours, by noontime, it is clear that it is no longer “now is night”; what the subject knows is that “now is day.” Hegel takes it to be a failure of the subject, a falsification of the truth that he had initially reported.

Before I attend to the failure, let me show how personal freedom explains two features of the experience that lead to this failure. To begin with, it is not clear from Hegel’s argument why it is the case that a knowledge-claim must conform to anything beyond the state of affairs at the moment in which it is expressed. Yet, Hegel holds the subject responsible not for the state of affairs in the relevant moment but rather to what he calls the “criterion”, namely, the subject’s conception of reality, its alleged character as “immediate”. To be sure, the idea that knowledge is not only true belief but also one that the cognizer is able to justify is an ancient one.
However, it is not a *justification* that Hegel expects of the subject. It is not the case that the knowledge-claim proves to be true, and the subject fails to point to standards that justify it. Rather, the knowledge-claim turns out to be *not* true, because its object was *not* reality when it was expressed but rather reality insofar as it endures beyond the moment of the knowledge-claim. If *this* was the object of the knowledge-claim, then a knowledge-claim like “now is night” is indeed not true since the content that it expresses is not enduring.

I believe that once we conceive of the subject as implicitly committed to personal freedom we see why it is the case that what *matters* in cognition is the enduring element in reality. The subject aims at the truth (in this demanding sense) because this is a condition for identifying with items that are known according to this criterion. Only such items are appropriate objects of personal freedom, insofar as they prove to be utterly external to the free subject. If, by contrast, an item obtains only in the moment of expressing the knowledge-claim, the knowledge-claim failed since it did not establish that its object was external to it. Furthermore, the subject cannot possibly engage in justification, for the simple reason that, as abstractly free, he does not recognize any standard of justification; any such standard would be imposed on him from outside. Only the subject’s conception of reality—insofar as it is a necessary aspect of being personally free—is acceptable from the point of view of the subject.

The next feature of the experience that personal freedom clarifies is the demand to express knowledge in propositions. Again, this is something that Hegel presents as an obvious demand for which he does not provide any argument.
Charles Taylor has suggested, in this connection, that “Hegel treats the ability to say as one of the criterial properties of knowledge”, but this hardly speaks in favor of accepting such a “criterial property”. By contrast, conceiving of the subject as concerned with realizing personal freedom shows why the subject is committed to this criterion. Representing reality in a proposition amounts to subsuming it under a concept, namely, the category of “being”. When I say that “now is night”, I am representing an item as obtaining immediately and independently of me, that is, I thereby realize a commitment that follows from personal freedom. This point figures in Hegel’s commentary on Fichte in the Lectures. Approving of Fichte’s view, Hegel argues: “when I say ‘the paper is white’ I maintain thereby that the paper is white. But when I maintain that it is, then I make being—a pure category—into [an object for] my consciousness [...] and in this way I stand behind my ordinary consciousness” (LHP 234). Hegel goes on to claim that by knowing myself as ordinary consciousness—standing behind it, as it were—I am to see the respects in which ordinary consciousness is not externally determined as it takes itself to be, but rather active and determining. Taking these two points together, we reach the following idea. Knowing my object as “being”—or as falling under the category of being—is not passive and receptive but rather an active determination of the subject. And indeed, this squares with my claim about the relation between the person and his conception of reality. Insofar as one is implicitly committed to personal freedom, one is committed to determine the object as falling under the concept of being, that is, as immediate and independent of the subject. This is the

95 Taylor (1975), 141.
case despite—and partly because of—the fact that the subject himself is not aware of what is happening. To be sure, in Part 2 I insisted that the person must represent reality as non-conceptual, so it seems to be at odds with my current claim that propositional language serves to represent reality as falling under the category (or concept) of being. However, the contradiction is not mine but the person’s. The person must remain unconscious of the fact that his conception of reality is informed by his practical nature. While he conceives of reality as non-conceptual, the truth is that this is, indeed, a conception—an application of a concept or a category to reality because it serves the subject’s freedom.

Having explained these two features of the experience, we can now proceed to an account of its failure. Thus, insofar as the subject in concerned with proving that an item of content is independent of representing it, he must show that it endures beyond the moment of the representing or beyond the moment in which the knowledge-claim is expressed. The experience, however, proves him wrong. In both moments in which an item is expressed, the item does not endure beyond the moment of knowing. On the face of it, this failure is contingent, in the sense that it occurs because the object happened to change—from night to day. It seems that if the subject were to express both knowledge-claims in the course of the night, for example, he would not be confronted with a failure. However, having personal freedom as an implicit presupposition of the experience, explains why this failure is not contingent but necessary—in the sense that it necessarily follows from the subject’s conception of freedom.

Thus, if it were the same item, which was the object of two separate
knowledge-claims, then the object of the knowledge-claim would not be particular or immediate but rather a concept. For the sameness of the items is not given in any of the particular experiences; rather, it must involve a moment in which the objects of the two experiences are compared and the subject judges them to be the same. If this judgment is arbitrary, then what the subject knows as a result of it is not external to the subject. Only if this judgment is norm-governed, that is, applies a concept to the manifold provided by the two (or more) experiences, can we talk of this judgment as expressing something which is different from the subject. However, the subject, insofar as he is personally free, does not acknowledge the authority of conceptual norms. Therefore, on pain of disavowing his commitment to the externality of items, he must represent items as different from each other. To put it otherwise, the difference between the items is not a feature of reality; it is a logical difference, in the sense that it necessarily follows from the subject’s self-conception. Being personally free, the subject must represent items as particular or immediate, for representing them as similar presupposes a commitment to a conceptual norm. In this case the item represented would not be external in the strong sense that personal freedom demands, for the relation to the item would be mediated by a norm.

This consideration reveals the contradiction that lies in the core of the person’s conception of reality. On the one hand, insofar as the subject is committed

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96 This sentence risks a misreading so let me clarify. In some sense, also the act of representing items as different (so not only as the same) presupposes the application of a concept. In fact, any representation, since it synthesizes more than one moment of experience, must involve conceptualization. This is ultimately Hegel’s point in Sense Certainty. When I say that the (personally free) subject is committed to representing items as different, I mean that he is committed to representing them as discreet or immediate.
to personal freedom, he is committed to knowing items as independent of his knowing thereof—which means that they must endure beyond the moment of expressing them in a knowledge-claim. On the other hand, in order to establish this endurance, the subject must employ a concept that would exhibit the sameness of two distinct moments of experience, but he is precluded from this operation because, again, he is committed to personal freedom.\footnote{Incidentally, I believe that this contradiction maps into the basic and unresolvable dilemma that Robert Brandom (in his unpublished commentary on the \textit{Phenomenology}) finds in Sense Certainty, namely, “the incompatibility between two features of sense certainty’s conception of the cognitive authority of immediacy: immediacy of content and even minimal determinateness of content”. The authority of immediacy lies in a purely receptive taking-in of content—thereby avoiding the possibility of error—but the determinateness of content must involve comparison and differentiation, hence precisely the activity that undermines the epistemic authority of immediacy. I explain the horns of Brandom’s dilemma in terms of consciousness’s tacit conception of freedom. As for the first horn, the subject wants to avoid conceptual activity not, primarily, because he wants to avoid error, but because it would constrain his arbitrary freedom. The fear of error, as Hegel famously declares in the Introduction, “reveals itself as fear of the truth” (\textit{PhG}, 74), namely, a fear of the unity between subject and object, a unity which entails normative constraints on subjective freedom. As for the second horn, my suggestion is that the subject is concerned with determinateness of content because only determinate content is independent of—or external to—the subject, hence an appropriate object of arbitrary freedom. See Brandom (2013), Ch. 4.}

Against this backdrop we can approach Hegel’s cryptic remark in the end of Sense Certainty. Saying that we are now “permitted to anticipate how the case stands in the practical sphere,” he claims that the conclusion of Sense Certainty is exhibited in the behavior of animals, for “they do not just stand idly in front of sensuous things as if these possessed intrinsic being, but, despairing of their reality, and completely assured of their nothingness, they fall to without ceremony and eat them up” (\textit{PhG} §109). Robert Brandom cites this anecdote as an example to what he calls “reliable differentiating response” to reality—one that animals exhibit.\footnote{Ibid.} There is a sense in which such a response is similar to applying a concept. After all, those animals treat reality as food, that is, as falling under a certain category. However, this
is not an application of a concept, for it does not exhibit a norm-governed behavior. Reality is food because the animal-subject determines it as food; or more generally, the subject’s taking an item X as having a certain character Y makes it the case that X is Y. Consequently, there is no sense in which the subject is responsible to any standard or a norm that is independent of him. In fact, the animal behavior seems to exhibit an exercise of personal (hence arbitrary) freedom, insofar as the person’s taking items to be his—taking possession of them—makes it the case that they are his possession. However, it is not even this, for the subject has failed to establish the externality of the item, namely, his knowledge-claim that it obtains independently of him. Personal freedom is not realized insofar as the person destroys and consumes items, but insofar as the subject is recognized as possessing items that have an independent existence; indeed, as I emphasized in Part 2, the person wants to give himself “an external sphere of freedom.”

I believe that Hegel’s animal anecdote shows us how the person deals with the contradiction that his conception of reality exhibits, and this is the sense in which this story “anticipates how the case stands in the practical sphere.” The person can treat different experiences as similar only if he takes this similarity to be arbitrary, a similarity that he projects on external reality. However, this is not an application of a concept for there is no norm involved. The subject is not responsible to any norm in his (implicit) claim that reality is food. It is food because he takes it to be food. Such a projection would not be an act of cognition, of representing a reality that is independent of the subject. The object of the subject’s experience is something he himself projects.
It is hardly surprising, then, that for Hegel this anecdote exemplifies not only a doubt [Zweifel] about the reality of items, but despair [Verzweiflung] of it. That is, the animal attitude exhibits the attitude of a subject who completely disavows the idea that items obtain independently of him. Furthermore, the despair is not only about the reality of items, but also about the reality of freedom itself. This is admittedly not explicit in the text, but it follows from the definition of personal freedom as I presented it in Part 2, and it is confirmed by a comment that Hegel makes in the Philosophy of Right. I defined personal freedom as realized only if the free subject knows the item that is the object of his freedom—what he claims to be his. Despair about the reality of items implies that this conditional would not be satisfied; hence personal freedom would not be realized. And Hegel confirms this point when he says, in the Philosophy of Right (PHR §4Z), that animals are not free since they do not know the objects of their activity. Insofar as a subject, similarly, does not know them, then his activity amounts to animal behavior; and, as such, his activity is not a realization of freedom.

We see, then, why personal freedom is inherently skeptical. On the one hand, the person is committed to conceive of reality as utterly external to him, hence as obtaining independently of his relation to it. On the other hand, any attempt to know an item as real in this sense turns out to involve an arbitrary subjective projection that bears no necessary relation to how things are independently of the subject. It follows that neither items are real nor personal freedom is real, since personal freedom must be realized by identifying with real items, items that are utterly external to the subject.
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Having said that, I would like to suggest that the contradiction that the person’s conception of reality exhibits, much as it is inherently skeptical, does not have to transpire in despair. Indeed, Hegel himself says towards the end of Sense Certainty, that “natural consciousness” tends to “forget” the harsh conclusion of its experience, and again attributes reality to the items that it represents. There is, however, a “third way” or middle way between despair—that is, conceding that items are “nothing” as Hegel puts it (which also implies, as I said, that freedom is not real)—and the oblivion that “natural consciousness” exhibits. I will first say something about this oblivion, and then elaborate on that third way, which, I suggest, is the way of modern personhood.

“Natural consciousness [das natürliche Bewuβtsein],” Hegel says, “is always reaching this result, learning from experience what is true in it; but equally it is always forgetting [vergibt] it and starting the movement all over again.” The result is the realization that items in the world, those that the subject took to be independent of him, are not, in truth, self-standing. Given this harsh realization, Hegel continues, the subject forgets; in contemporary idiom, we could say that he suppresses it. I take Hegel to allude to this possibility in the Encyclopedia, where he suggests that one way to respond to the experience of consciousness in the beginning of the Phenomenology would be “to return to child-like unity [kindhafter Einheit]” with the world (E3 413Z). This “child-like unity” amounts to oblivion (or, say, suppression), since, insofar as the subject is united with the world, he does not conceive of himself as independent thereof—hence not as (immediately, abstractly) free. Therefore, nor
does the subject conceive of reality as utterly external to him, and hence he can “forget” the fact that items had proved to be not real in this sense. By saying that natural consciousness “forgets” its experience, Hegel suggests that it is taking part in a vicious circle of sorts, a perpetual recurrence—at times taking itself to be independent of the world, and then, facing its failure to assert this independence, it returns to “child-like unity” with it. By contrast, the phenomenological consciousness—that which learns from its experience—must face the despair that is coupled with the realization of sense certainty. The educational path of consciousness, he says in the Introduction, is the “pathway of doubt, and more precisely the way of despair” (PhG §78). Only given such a harsh experience, the subject would come to modify his conception of reality, in line with the development of consciousness in the subsequent chapters of the Phenomenology.

Modernity, however, presents us with yet another option, what I call “the third way”. Hegel points to this option in a passage this dissertation frequently returns to. In the Enlightenment, he say, “consciousness, which in its very first reality is sense-certainty [...] returns to this form from the whole course of its experience and is again a knowledge of what is purely negative to itself, or of things of sense, i.e. things which immediately and indifferently confront its being-for-self. Here, however, it is not an immediate, natural consciousness.” In what way is it different? In that “it is absolutely certain that it is, and that there are other real things outside it” (PhG §558).

I suggest calling this modern sense certainty a self-confident sense certainty; its confidence arises from its commitment to personal freedom. The person is this
“being-for-self” who takes items to be immediately confronting him, utterly external, and real in precisely this sense. To be sure, we have seen that this conception of reality leads to a contradiction and hence to skepticism. Yet, that a certain shape of subjectivity exhibits a contradiction does not necessarily lead to its disappearance. In fact, it is precisely the person, according to Hegel, who has the unique ability to sustain a contradiction—an ability that constitutes a “supreme achievement” (PhR §35Z). In the remainder of Part 3, I will elaborate a notion of contradiction, which is unique to persons—both in their practical and in their cognitive activities.

“The supreme achievement of the person,” Hegel says, “is to support this contradiction, which nothing in the natural realm contains or could endure.” The contradiction that Hegel refers to is the contradiction between the person’s self-conception as free and the fact that as an individual human being he is thoroughly (externally) determined. Insofar as the person conceives of himself as free, as self-determining, the fact that he is externally determined seems, indeed, to contradict his self-conception. However, much as it is a contraction, it is a contradiction that serves the person’s self-conception. For, inasmuch as the person represents reality as externally determined, as obtaining immediately or independently of him, he thereby has the motivation to “overcome this limitation”, as Hegel puts it, by identifying with items in the world, taking possession of them.

We can make sense of this notion—call it a productive contradiction—if we have in view Hegel’s organic understanding of subjectivity. Let us define “organic

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99 “Supreme achievement” stands for *die Hoheit (der Person)*. While I considered changing the translation to “greatness” or “majesty”, I decided to leave it as it is. For, “achievement” does capture an important aspect of *Hoheit*, namely, that the greatness is not given, as it were, but actualized, *achieved* and maintained by exercising authority or sovereignty over others.
contradiction” as follows: a subject S exhibits an organic contradiction if and only if S’s concept—how it ought to be according to its nature—is different from S. Cast in these terms, it is clear that concrete organisms exhibit this contradiction insofar as they do not perfectly embody how they ought to be according to their nature. An acorn, to pick a favorite example, is in organic contradiction since it does not yet actualize the concept of an oak tree. A boy exhibits organic contradiction since he is not yet a man. A sick bird is in organic contradiction since according to its concept it ought to be healthy. Furthermore, by Hegel’s lights—following a long Aristotelian tradition—the fact that there is discrepancy between an organism and its concept does not mean by itself that there is anything wrong or defective with it; instead, it explains the organism’s future development towards a full actualization of its concept.

I suggest that the person, too, exhibits organic contradiction but with two important differences that set this subjective structure apart from organisms in general. First, as a spiritual or self-conscious organic subject, the contradiction is not between a concept and an object but between two conceptions of the person, namely, his self-conception as self-determining and his conception of reality as externally determined. Second, unlike an organism in general, there are no prospects for canceling or resolving this contradiction. The acorn’s organic contradiction can be resolved by the acorn’s future development. Even if full resolution is impossible—say because actual organisms never perfectly exhibit their concept—a resolution is logically possible. By contrast, it is essential to the person’s self-

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100 It could mean that the organism is sick or defective but also that it is still in an early developmental stage. Furthermore, even a defect could ultimately enhance the life of the organism. Cf. Rand (2013), 77.
conception that there is a reality that is utterly external to him, thereby contradicting this very self-conception. Therefore, I suggest, Hegel takes the endurance of this contradiction to be so difficult, to the extent that “nothing in the natural realm contains it or could endure”; nothing, that is, besides a human person. Yet, despite the differences from organic contradiction in general, I believe that the contradiction essential to personal freedom similarly explains the dynamic of the person, namely, the constant effort to overcome this very contradiction.

Next, the notion of organic contradiction also applies to the way in which an organic subject relates to its environment. It is part of the concept of a bird, for example, that it modifies its environment in accordance with its concept, say builds a nest for its offspring. We can say, then, that the bird exhibits an organic contradiction as long as the nest is not in place, and this contradiction explains why it ends up building it. I suggest that we can understand along these lines the contradiction inherent to the person’s conception of reality. On the one hand, according to the concept of a person (which is a self-conception, as it is a spiritual subject), reality is utterly external. On the other hand, it turns out that items are not real in this sense (and this is also an insight of the person—something that that, as a spiritual subject, he is conscious of). This contradiction, rather than be a reason to forgo the person’s conception of reality, explains why the person persists in his attempts to establish it. To be sure, like the contradiction in the person’s conception of freedom, the contradiction in his conception of reality is logically unresolvable, but, in a similar vein, it still motivates his activity—cognitive activity, in this case.
To give a better sense of what such (contradictory) cognitive activity entails, let me say more about a sort of skepticism that does not transpire in despair—call it a non-despaired skepticism. I understand the non-despaired skeptic as a subject who acknowledges that there may be doubts about a view of hers, but she nonetheless dogmatically sticks to it. A typical example of such a non-despaired—or better: dogmatic—skeptic is Gottlob Ernst Schulze. In an early essay, Hegel suggests that Schulze represents the broader outlook that he deems “modern skepticism”—an outlook that he attacks as an inconsistent fusion of skepticism and dogmatism. While Schulze believes that the subject cannot know reality as it is in-itself, what is utterly external to the subject, he is convinced that the subject can know items that are present to his consciousness. Modern Skepticism will be at the center of my discussion in the next chapter, but a quick preview will help to make sense of the dogmatic-skeptical attitude that I attribute to the modern person.

Thus, Schulze, in line with personal freedom, conceives of reality as utterly external to the subject and concedes that we cannot know anything about it. While he takes this conception to be essential to how human consciousness operates, he does not acknowledge its practical nature, the fact that it is an aspect of subjective freedom.\(^{101}\) So far Schulze expresses the features of the skepticism inherent to personal freedom. However, his skepticism about knowing external reality does not make Schulze any less dogmatic about our ability to know items that are present to our subjective consciousness. He argues that such cognition falls short of external

\(^{101}\) Schulze is a Kantian in his view that this conception of reality is essential to human consciousness, but he is a “vulgar Kantian”, according to Hegel, in his failure to appreciate the practical nature of consciousness (RSP 318).
reality—reality in-itself—but picks on reality as it is for the subject.

In the next chapter, I will suggest that this outlook gives the skepticism that is inherent to modern personhood’s conception of reality a seemingly respectable (yet mistaken) philosophical vindication. Schulze shares the insight that the person’s conception of reality is inevitable, following from the structure of the subject as such. The fact that the subject fails to know reality—conceived in this way—is not a reason to forgo this conception. The subject is to insist that the items that he represents are real in this sense, relying on an obscure ontological differentiation between external reality (“reality as it is in-itself”) and reality as it is for the subject. I will elaborate on this logic in Chapter III.

Conclusion: Personal Freedom and Modern Philosophy

Opening his treatment of modern philosophy in the Lectures, Hegel declares: “thinking at this stage arises essentially as something subjective in such a way that it has an antithesis in being in general [am Seienden überhaupt].” He goes on to say that modern philosophers are all concerned with “reconciling this opposition,” that is, with knowing an object conceived as utterly external to the subject. In the Introduction to the Phenomenology, Hegel makes it clear that he takes this separation between subject and object to be a fundamental mistake of modern philosophy, a mistake that dooms modern philosophy to skepticism about the very ability to know.

The current chapter has reconstructed the ethical background of this mistake. I argued that it is from the standpoint of personal freedom, that the modern
subject is committed to represent reality as utterly external to him, for it is only then that reality does not place the subject under any normative constraints. Reality is thereby suitable as an “external sphere of freedom.” That the ordinary subject is not aware of it—hence cognition is perceived as a totally separate business than practical freedom—is itself a condition for realizing freedom. If the subject were aware of it, I suggested in Part 2, it would have compromised his self-conception as arbitrarily free.

The question, however, is about the sense in which this ethical background—the rise of the modern person and his conception of reality—explains the standpoint of modern skepticism, namely, the separation between subject and object. After all, the latter is a philosophical outlook; it is an idea that ordinary persons—or non-philosophers—would hardly ever entertain. However, Hegel believes that modernity is characterized by a special relation between ordinary life and philosophy. Even if ordinary persons do not entertain philosophical doctrines, philosophers are deeply affected by the ordinary standpoint. In modernity, Hegel says, “philosophers occupy no specific position in the state; they live in bourgeois circumstances or participate in public life, or in living their private lives they do so in such a way that their private status does not isolate them from other relationships” (LHP 110). This situation, he stresses, is decisively different from the lives of philosophers in previous epochs. Whereas in the Middle Ages philosophical practice was mainly confined to monasteries, in antiquity philosophers lived in separate communities or “schools”.

I would like to suggest, then, that insofar as philosophers in modernity are also ordinary individuals—indeed, they realize their personal freedom in various
ethical spheres—their ethical background is not just a “background”. It would be more fitting to call it, as I do, an ethical *basis*, as it explains a key presupposition of modern philosophy that Hegel takes to be mistaken. My argument offers an explanation for the persistence of this mistake, namely, it is a mistake that serves personal freedom, a mistake productive for its continuous realization.

The next chapter proceeds from this point. Drawing on a detailed account of modern skepticism as a philosophical or theoretical outlook, it offers a more elaborate and systematic presentation of the relationship between the ethical and the theoretical.
Chapter III

Skeptical Dogmatism and the Threat of Nihilism:

The Ethics of a Philosophical Mistake

For many students of philosophy, the term “skepticism” immediately brings to mind a familiar image. It is Descartes of the first Meditation, the lone individual who withdraws to his private room, gaining a safe distance from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Only from there can he question the most obvious of beliefs, those that he follows as long as he is practically engaged with the world.\(^\text{102}\) Skepticism, then, seems to have very little to do with social and political conditions. It is despite these conditions that the skeptic is being skeptical, rather than because of them. And while Descartes is surely a peculiar, even if ultra-influential, skeptic—let alone the mediator ultimately proves himself an anti-skeptic—the notion that philosophical skepticism is disconnected from ordinary or practical life extends far beyond him. It is manifested in the common perception that the skeptic cannot quite stick to her skepticism once she leaves her philosophical armchair. As James Conant has put it, “[t]he skeptical discovery cannot be converted into practice,” or—to use David

\(^{102}\) See, for example, the second maxim of “provisional ethics” in Descartes (2003), 18.
Hume’s metaphor—we are doomed to “leave our philosophical study and return to the backgammon table”.¹⁰³

I begin by arguing that recent literature on Hegel’s engagement with skepticism neatly squares with this common perception. Leading commentators like Michael Forster and Paul Franks fail to appreciate what I aim to show in this chapter: the explanatory link that Hegel draws between modern skepticism and its socio-political—what he broadly calls “ethical” [sittlich]—conditions.¹⁰⁴ Specifically, I argue that modern skepticism is grounded in personal freedom as it is sustained and promoted within modern civil society, the sphere of the market economy.

Following Franks’s account, I understand modern skepticism as skepticism about justification, namely, about our ability to justify our knowledge-claim in reference to an absolute, purposive principle—the traditional object of metaphysics. This skepticism is combined with a dogmatic side, namely, avowing the knowledge offered by the natural sciences even though it cannot be so justified. But, unlike Franks (and others), I explain this peculiar combination in relation to modern civil society. The skeptical aspect reflects the modern person’s claim to utter normative independence. If the person is expected to ground his knowledge-claims in an

¹⁰³ Conant 2004, 107 and n17. Conant draws on Stanley Cavell’s extensive work, e.g., in 1979, Chs. III&IV. While Cavell has stressed, perhaps more than anyone else, the ethical aspect of modern skepticism, including its manifestations in literature and film, he rarely considers the broader socio-political context that informs this ethics. An exception is Cavell 1990, in which he offers a sophisticated critique of John Rawls’s Theory of Justice, suggesting, as I read it, that liberal theory proceeds from a skeptical conception of individual freedom. In the continental context, Michel Foucault draws an insightful connection between the British empiricist conception of freedom and the rise of modern economy (Foucault 2008, Chs. XI&XII). Hegel prefigures some of Foucault’s points. For a recent instructive discussion of this Foucauldian idea, see Menke 2015, 197-199.

¹⁰⁴ An exception to this trend is Bristow (2005, 2007). Bristow’s account of the connection between modern practical freedom and philosophical skepticism emphasizes rational (or moral) freedom—and its origin in the Protestant Reformation—while my argument focuses on the role of civil society and naturalist conceptions of freedom.
absolute, purposive principle, then his normative independence is compromised. Therefore, modern personal freedom is served by a philosophical claim that such an absolute principle cannot be known. However, given the dynamic of modern civil society—and the demand that persons would realize themselves in the world—this metaphysical skepticism must be combined with a claim to knowledge, with positing a reality that could then be appropriated, shaped and utilized by persons. As we saw in the previous chapter, personal actualization must be accompanied with knowledge of objects as “utterly external”, so that the knowing thereof would not place the person under normative constraints. The natural sciences construe reality precisely in this manner, namely, as brute “stuff” that the modern person can use in accordance with his immediate, arbitrary goals; the person can treat reality as mere “utility” [Nützlichkeit].

My approach—understanding modern skepticism in relation to its ethical basis—has three exegetical and philosophical advantages. First, it explains why Hegel—despite his dismissal of modern skepticism as a philosophical proposal—has maintained a continuous engagement with it. As Paul Franks puts it,

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\text{notwithstanding his view of its philosophical merits, [modern skepticism] remains in competition with his own philosophical project [...] While Hegel's views about skepticism and other important matters shifts significantly after Schelling's departure from Jena in 1803, his early views constitute the indispensable backdrop against which to understand the Phenomenology and his later writings. Nowhere is this more true than in the case of skepticism.}^\text{106}
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105 Cf. PhG ¶479.
106 Franks (2008), 52-53.
Insofar as Hegel’s “chief interest,” as John Dewey puts it, “was practical rather than merely theoretical,” an interest in “how the idea of freedom, individuality, the principle, that is, of the enlightenment, could be reconciled with the substantial value of history and of social relations,” then we can only expect him to engage seriously with a view—theoretically mistaken as it is—that is coupled with this ethical predicament.¹⁰⁷

Second, once we have in view the ethical conditions of modern skepticism—we understand why, despite its theoretical shortcomings, this outlook has held such power over the modern philosophical imagination. John McDowell has called the premise of modern skepticism—that there is “an ontological and epistemological gulf across which the subjective and the objective are supposed to face each other”—“[t]he basic misconception of modern philosophy”, its “visibly dubious” assumption.¹⁰⁸ My ethical account of this assumption does not only explain it but also suggests that there is something rational about it. (In Chapter IV, I argue that it is rational in the sense that it is ethically functional.)

The third advantage of the ethical approach to modern skepticism lies in the continuity that it reveals between ancient and modern varieties of skepticism. Commentators have stressed the differences between them, but Hegel—much as he celebrates ancient, “good” skepticism in comparison with modern, “bad” skepticism—also suggests that this historical development reflects a continuity that revolves around the idea of skepticism as such. My account makes sense of this

¹⁰⁷ Dewey (2010), 105. Dewey goes on to say that modernity, by Hegel’s lights, has led to “almost anarchic individualism” in which all institutions and settled authority have dissolved, while the individual has gained only an “unstable liberty.”

¹⁰⁸ McDowell (1998), 888n, 889.
continuity. I argue that both sorts of skepticism are grounded in what Hegel calls “abstract freedom”, namely, the freedom of the subject who claims utter normative independence from his life form. Abstract freedom is then ethically actualized—receives legal and institutional recognition—in the form of personal freedom or “abstract right”. It is personal freedom—in the Roman Empire and the modern West respectively—that explains both ancient and modern skepticism, according to Hegel. The differences reflect the different ways and degrees to which personal freedom is actualized in these distinct ethical contexts.

Having these three advantages of an ethical account in view, I can finally spell out the account. The chapter focuses on modern skepticism as a philosophical view, while the previous chapter has centered on modern skepticism as an ethical (or, say, ordinary) standpoint. However, the nature of my discussion makes it difficult, or unnecessary, to clearly distinguish the two. Accordingly, the last section of this chapter, Part 4, lays out key ethical dangers that are bound with modern skepticism—what I call the threat of nihilism.

**PART 1: Two Unsatisfying Accounts**

I would like to approach my account of modern skepticism via two other accounts—by Michael Forster and Paul Franks—that I find unsatisfying. While Forster’s discussion misses a key feature of modern skepticism (at least in Hegel’s understanding thereof), my main issue with both accounts—so this applies to Franks as well (albeit to a lesser extent)—is that they fail to appreciate the ethical aspects of modern skepticism, that is, precisely the reason why Hegel is obsessed
with this philosophical outlook. In both accounts, Hegel’s (negative) approach to modern skepticism is presented by way of contrasting it with his (positive) view of ancient skepticism. I shall follow this example but suggest, ultimately, that this contrast risks missing something that ancient and modern skepticisms have in common.

Let us begin with Michael Forster, perhaps the foremost recent commentator on Hegel’s (and other German Idealists’) engagement with skepticism. Forster stresses the difference between ancient and modern skepticism. At the outset of his *Hegel and Skepticism*, he claims that ancient skepticism is based on a method, one which is applied in order to reach a definite goal; modern skepticism, by contrast, is based on a cluster of specific problems—in the correlative threefold sense of problems which arise for some kinds of claims or beliefs but not for others, which are raised not in the service of any positive goal but simply because they seem to demand solutions, and which essentially rely on the presupposition of the correctness of certain other claims or beliefs. Typically the modern skeptic’s specific problems concern the legitimacy of proceeding from claims about a certain kind of subject matter, the knowledge of which is assumed to be absolutely or relatively unproblematic, to claims about a second kind of subject matter, the knowledge of which is not felt to be unproblematic in the same way.¹⁰⁹

Forster is surely right that ancient skepticism is based on a method in the service of a positive goal. Sextus Empiricus defines the ethical aim [*telos*] of

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¹⁰⁹ Forster (1989), 11.
skepticism, “that for the sake of which everything is done or considered,” as ataraxia, namely, tranquility or un-troubledness. To realize this aim, the skeptics devised a set of argumentative strategies or tropes, which were employed in order to generate, for any positive claim (belief, value-judgment), an opposing claim with the same force of persuasion. The subject would then be pushed to suspend judgment, and it is suspension of judgment, about all matters, that was supposed to bring about the desired ataraxia.

However, Paul Franks argues that modern skepticism is, similarly, based on a method, namely, the method of the natural sciences. He understands this method as the conjunction of two commitments, both espoused by modern skeptics: post-Kantian naturalism and post-Jacobian foundationalism. The first commitment is the view that philosophy must do away with Kant's transcendental method, which is perceived as an unfortunate vestige of his metaphysical attachments. Rather, philosophy should explore the human mind as a psychological or anthropological subject matter. Kant's categories and forms of intuition are construed as empirical facts about the way in which the human mind functions instead of conceiving them as following from a normative commitment to a certain purpose or final cause, the unity of experience. The laws that govern the mind's operation, like other natural entities, are taken to be ultimately mechanical laws. The second commitment, to Post-Jacobian foundationalism, is the view that any body of knowledge is ultimately

110 Sextus says, more precisely, “tranquility in matters of opinion and moderation of feeling in matters forced on us”. But the latter qualification is a compromise, given the conditions of life. Thus we can say that the ideal aim is tranquility, though realistically the skeptic has to sometimes make do with “moderation of feeling”. Empiricus (2000), 12.
based on brute matters of facts—*Tatsachen*—that cannot be demonstrated or justified, but nor can or should be doubted.

Franks is not entirely clear about how these two commitments mutually constitute a method we could think of as the method of the natural sciences, but his discussion of Jacobi’s construal of this method provides two helpful clues. First, this method could also be employed *metaphysically*, most clearly in Spinoza’s system. Second, and bound with the first, this method leads to what Jacobi calls nihilism, which entails, *inter alia*, the non-reality of particular entities and individual freedom in favor of an all-encompassing abstract reality, namely, Spinoza’s substance.

Based on these clues I characterize the method of modern skepticism as follows. The modern skeptic acknowledges the undeniable certainty of matters of fact. He then works to discover general principles that are supposed to account for these particular facts on the model of mechanical laws of nature. For example, as a modern skeptic I don’t doubt the presence of natural phenomena in my vicinity; these are my *Tatsachen*. I then formulate laws that explain why these facts strike me in certain times and places. However, in this process the phenomenal quality of these facts is lost. The general principles must reduce these facts to geometrical or quantitative properties, thereby eliminating the individual quality that they have for my subjective consciousness. Abstractions like "matter", "movement", "quantity" replace what they are supposed to explain—the palpable presence of trees, houses, nights and days.

My proposal calls for elaboration that I will provide later. I’d like to address two immediate questions that Franks’s account of modern skepticism gives rise to.
First, in what sense is modern skepticism even skeptical? It seems that it is rather committed to a great deal of knowledge, the knowledge provided by the natural sciences. And indeed, Hegel condemns modern skepticism as dogmatic. Its dogmatism, however, is necessarily bound with a skeptical aspect. For, the premise that we—given what strikes our subjective consciousness—cannot doubt a certain range of content, relativizes the knowledge of this content to our subjective faculties. In terms that Hegel favors, the dogmatism of modern skepticism is about reality as it is for consciousness, not about reality as it is in-itself, independently of consciousness. This distinction—between what is for-the-subject and what is in-itself—legitimizes the dogmatic side of modern skepticism but, at the same time, generates skepticism about the independent or external object. I will later argue that the sceptical side of modern skepticism—about our ability to know the object in-itself—conceals a more basic skepticism, namely, about our ability to justify our knowledge in reference to an absolute, purposive, principle.

The second question concerns the scope of this heading, “modern skepticism”. When we think of modern skeptics, we immediately have in mind the likes of Descartes or Hume, but Franks locates his account in the context of post-Kantian philosophy. It is this period which is the object of an essay Hegel publishes in 1802, On the Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy. When Hegel uses the term “modern skepticism” in this early essay, he has Gottlob Ernst Schulze and other post-Kantian naturalists in mind. Forster’s account, by contrast, doesn’t pose this problem since his characterization of modern skepticism is much broader—broad

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111 RSP 330: “finally in those most recent times, [skepticism] has sunk so far in company with dogmatism that for both of them nowadays the facts of consciousness have an indubitable certainty.”
enough as to easily include a great variety of modern skeptics, starting with Descartes of the first Meditation.

However, despite the fact that Franks mainly draws on the post-Kantian context, I believe his account applies at least to some early modern skeptics as well. The key to seeing this lies in appreciating the following point. What makes an item of content undeniable, a *Tatsache*, is not the kind of stuff it is made of. A *Tatsache* could be a mental representation, much as the existence of a certain natural object. What makes it undeniable, rather, is the *attitude* that the subject has to this item. This attitude consists in the subject's refusal to doubt this item of content. It is for this reason that this item is real *for* the subject, while leaving a sphere—reality in-itself—about which the subject is skeptical. Different modern skeptics have had different ideas about the items that fall in the realm of undeniable knowledge. An external world skeptic like Descartes of the first Meditation would limit those items to mental representations; Schulze, by contrast, includes natural objects. In other words, a *Tatsache* doesn't *have* to be a natural fact, and hence a typical modern skeptic doesn't have to be a *substantial* naturalist (even if many of them are). What makes for a modern skeptic, rather, is a commitment to the *method* of the natural sciences, namely, to taking contents as true *because* they are taken to externally determine the subject, rather than because they are justified in terms of an absolute principle (and I will clarify this alternative below). What defines a modern skeptic, then, is the *stance* that he takes with regard to what makes content real, whereas the sorts of content that qualify as real differ, depending on the skeptic.
Having said that, I believe that Franks’s account, illuminating as it is, fails to appreciate a key aspect of modern skepticism, what I call its ethical basis. I will now offer reasons to go beyond Franks’s (and let alone, Forster's) proposal.

Towards an Ethical Account of Modern Skepticism

That a philosophical outlook has a special connection to the epoch in which it is conceived and practiced—to other sorts of human or spiritual activity in this epoch—is a basic idea for Hegel. Indeed, as the Philosophy of Right puts it, “philosophy is its own time comprehended in thoughts” (PHR 21). On the face of it, Franks’s account accommodates this idea, insofar as he points to a connection between modern skepticism and the rise of natural science. Given the success of modern science, the proposal could go, modern philosophers cannot but take note of it. Even in advancing skeptical theses, they cannot but accept a great deal of knowledge, that which the sciences propose. While Franks himself does not make this proposal, John McDowell has credited the rise of modern sciences with the separation—so basic to modern philosophy—between the free subject and a naturally determined object. Since McDowell (like Hegel) believes that this separation must result in skepticism, the rise of modern science, then, partly explains skepticism. In a similar vein, Charles Taylor has argued: “the [modern] epistemological construal is an understanding of knowledge that fits well with modern mechanistic science”.112

112 McDowell (1996), xix; Taylor (1995), XX.
My dissertation, however, elaborates a different order of explanation, which I take to be Hegel’s own. We begin with a self-conception of a subject—of what it means for him to be a subject, thereby realize his freedom—a self-conception which is sustained only given a definite ethical (or “spiritual”) context, and explain accordingly the subject’s conception of what is other to him, namely, of the object. In the introduction to this chapter I offered a few reasons to pursue such an explanation, and I will not rehearse them. But, let me add another reason: insofar as I am successful in elaborating such an ethical explanation for the subject’s conception of reality, Hegel’s dictum that philosophy is “its own time comprehended in thoughts” is lent a much deeper meaning. Philosophy is such a comprehension since it is a necessary aspect of the self-conception of spiritual beings—human beings—in a definite historical period. Specifically, I will argue that it is a necessary aspect of modern personal freedom, that the subject is to conceive of the object as being, in Leibniz’s words, the “realm of power”\(^{113}\), hence as revealed by the method of the natural sciences. While my discussion is focused on modernity, it invites a similar strategy for understanding other philosophical epochs. In fact, the next section will use the connection between the ethical conditions of the Roman Empire and ancient skepticism as a model for my claims about the modern West and modern skepticism.

\(^{113}\) Quoted by Neiman (1994), 21.
PART 2: Abstract Freedom and Ancient Skepticism

Much as the topic of this chapter is modern skepticism, it is helpful to approach it by way of revealing its continuity with ancient skepticism. This continuity, as I shall shortly explain, is first and foremost an ethical continuity, a similarity—much as development—in the conception of freedom that these distinct varieties of skepticism presuppose. Let us begin by elaborating on a point I made above, namely, that the ancient skeptical method is geared towards realizing a definite purpose, namely, untroubledness.

In section 12 of his Outlines of Pyrrhonism, Sextus Empiricus explains why suspension of judgment brings about ataraxia. The reason is that a commitment to a value or a fact brings about the opposite of ataraxia, namely, trouble or bother. If I believe that something is good and have it, I am troubled by the need to keep it or stick to it; if I believe that it’s good and I don’t have it, then I am troubled by pursuing it. While this point seems to be limited to value judgments, we can plausibly extend it to beliefs in general. If I take something to be true, I am bothered by defending and/or justifying this truth; if I believe it’s false, I am bothered by finding what is true (or, for that matter, show why it is indeed false, that is, defend/justify the truth of its falseness). Only suspension of judgment about all matters—avoiding beliefs or value judgments—would prevent such troubles.

In the Phenomenology, Hegel construes this ancient skeptical attitude in terms of a definite conception of freedom, namely, the abstract freedom of abstract self-consciousness. What is abstract self-consciousness? It is a subject that takes himself to exist independently of—or as abstracted from—any content whatsoever.
For a subject that is committed to such a self-conception, any positive determination entails a limitation of his freedom. If I am a man, I cannot be a woman, if my eyes are blue, they cannot be brown, if I believe that X, I cannot believe that non-X, if I take X to be good, I cannot assert that it is bad. The ancient skeptic, insofar as he is committed to this conception of freedom, must avoid any positive self-determination.

To be sure, the ancient skeptic—being a concrete human being—has a manifold of properties or determinations. Surely his eyes have a certain color, his genitals a certain form, and he is expected to perform various actions. In fact, this thought is the source of the most common critique leveled against the ancient skeptics, from antiquity to the present. Given his skeptical conviction, the argument goes, the skeptic is incapable of living. After all, ordinary life involves a great variety of determinations. It is told of Pyrrho, the legendary founder of the skeptical school, that his students had to pull him from the wheels of street carts, for if he moved himself it would entail that he believed that he's in danger (or, for that matter, that a vehicle was moving in his direction).

However, the skeptics had resources to counter this critique. Sextus concedes that the skeptics must live, but he says that they live "according to appearances" {\textit{phainomena}}. This means that they passively follow what strikes their consciousness, without endorsing or avowing that which strikes them. For example, if the skeptic is hungry, he is moved to eat; if he is ordered to pay taxes, he pays taxes. But these would not be his determinations, even if his body is determined in this or that manner, for he does not endorse or avow these determinations. We can
say that these determinations—indeed, all his determinations—are understood on the model of bodily reflexes. They just happen in one's body, without an intentional investment. The skeptic functions like an external observer with regard to whatever happens to him, that is, any properties that his body exhibits.

It is on this background that we can make sense of Hegel’s juxtaposition of ancient skepticism against the concept of life. Ancient skepticism (and stoicism), he says, is "indifferent to natural existence [...] Freedom in thought has only pure thought as its truth, a truth lacking the fullness of life" (PhG ¶200). Whereas "life" could be read here as a metaphor—a metaphor for participation in ordinary life—it rather reveals a deep philosophical point. Thus, for a reader of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature*, life signifies a form of unity between an individual organism and its species, a unity that is coupled with a sort of freedom. To use again an example from Chapters I and II, an individual migratory bird is essentially a member of its species, and as such there are various determinations that place this bird in norm-governed relations to other individual birds and the natural environment. When the temperatures fall in the end of the European summer, the bird migrates southwards. While this determination ("flying southwards") could be considered an external determination—being determined by an external cause—it is rather a self-determination, a determination of freedom. For, it is part of what it is to be a bird, a member of its species, that the bird relates to an external condition (the weather in Europe) in this manner. There is a sense, then, that this external condition is internal, a sense that I defined in the previous chapter as follows: An item of content X is internal to a subject S iff S must relate to X in order to realize S’s purposive
concept, its species-concept. A subject who is a member of a life-form relates to a variety of contents that are internal in this sense.

When Hegel asserts that the ancient skeptic is "indifferent to natural existence" and that his thought "lacks the fullness of life," he means that the skeptic takes himself to be independent of any such living unity. Indeed, the skeptic's conception of freedom—utterly abstract freedom—means that the skeptic does not take himself to be a member of a life-form. This, after all, would be at odds with abstract freedom.

Next, the ancient skeptic's conception of freedom entails a conception of content, of what is different from the subject. We can explicate this conception in contrast, again, to the notion of membership in a life-form. Within a living unity, items of content do not have the character they have independently of the way that members of this life-form relate to them. It is only for the migratory bird that the weather conditions in Europe, in a definite time, have the significance that entails migration southwards. A fitting idiom for articulating what I have in mind is talking about concepts in Hegel's peculiar sense, one that received a recent treatment by Robert Brandom. Thus, an item of content is a concept insofar as its character is determined by its rational connections to other concepts, that is, what it implies and implied by within a certain life-form. 'Red' is a concept, for example, in the sense that if it applies it implies that 'green' does not apply but that 'colored' does. If 'scarlet' applies, it implies that 'red' applies too. Similarly, if 'chair' applies, it implies that 'furniture' applies but also that 'sitting' does. It is in the context of a definite life-form that these rational or inferential connections carry a normative force. If I say
that X is red and that it is also green, I may exclude myself from the life-form in which these are considered opposing qualities, or at least cast a question on my belonging there.

Having this conception of content in view, we can make sense, by contrast, of the conception of content that I attribute to the ancient skeptic. Insofar as the skeptic conceives of himself as independent of—or abstracted from—any life-form, any item of content would be conceived as external, that is, as having the character it has independently or regardless of the subject’s relation to it. Given the definition of internal (or conceptual) content above, we can say that the skeptic relates to all content as external. Furthermore, the subject’s relation to this content must be passive and receptive. It is not the case, according to the skeptic’s conception, that in relating to this content, the subject contributes to its having the character it has—as is the case within a living unity; rather, it is because the content forces itself on the subject, strikes his consciousness, that the subject represents it in the way that he does. This is what it means to relate to content in the form of Sextus’s "appearances". Or in Hegel’s terminology, the subject relates to content as "immediate"—as that which is there without any mediation or intervention by the subject. In the same vein, the relation itself is "immediate", that is, not mediated by norms (of a life-form).

To be sure, in attributing this conception of content to the ancient skeptics, I am not endorsing it. I only articulate what follows from the conception of freedom that Hegel attributes to them. In fact, we should even avoid assuming that the skeptics themselves *avow* this conception of content; after all, they want to avoid
any avowal. The skeptics’ goal, given their tacit conception of freedom, is to avoid any positive or self-determination. By representing their relation to content as forced—as an external determination—they avoid any positive or self-determination, that is, a determination for which they would be responsible and would thereby break their precious ataraxia. The skeptic need not endorse this conception of content as a conception but he nonetheless acts it out, so to speak.

We can now finally discuss the ethical conditions of ancient skepticism, starting off with the following question: why would a subject, in the first place, conceive of himself as abstractly free—as independent of any life-form—hence conceive of content as immediate?

To begin with, it is Hegel’s idea that a self-conscious member of a (spiritual/rational) life-form would essentially strive to independence from her life-form. This is an aspect of the member’s striving to freedom as self-determination. For, the story told above about the self-determination exhibited by life-form members was partial. There is a sense in which organisms that are not self-conscious are not self-determining after all. Whereas they are determined by norms that follow from their essential concept, the concept itself is given for them; they are simply born as migratory birds, ants or cactuses. Only self-conscious organisms like us can truly be self-determined insofar as they identify with their species-concept, hence with the norms that articulate it. However, if such identification is an act of freedom, it must presuppose the possibility of negating such an identification, that is, a moment of independence from one’s life-form.
Accordingly, as I argued in Chapter I, it is part of Hegel’s account of self-consciousness in general—or ordinary human beings—that they are capable of standing back from the norms of their life-form, thereby asserting their independence. However, it is most usually the case that the ordinary individual returns to what Hegel calls "child-like unity with the world". It is on this background that we can understand his admiration for the ancient skeptic, since in the skeptic’s case the subject does not forgo his independence; the subject, rather, sticks to his self-conception as independent of life. I take it that, for Hegel, this insistence is essential to philosophy as such, hence he commends ancient skepticism for being the "beginning of any genuine philosophy" (RSP 323).

Having said that, we cannot account for the ancient skeptic’s commitment to independence just in terms of a trans-historical potential of the human individual as such. Rather, Hegel stresses that ancient skepticism has everything to do with the ethical conditions that prevail following the decline of the Greek polis.

Hegel traces ancient skepticism back to the legendary figure of Pyrrho (ca. 360-270 B.C.E.) and suggests that it could arise only given the decline of the Greek city-state, starting the 4th Century B.C.E.. In the polis, at least according to Hegel’s romantic view of it,114 ordinary individuals completely identified with the norms of their community; they conceived of themselves as members of a living unity. In his Hegel and Skepticism, Forster takes this identification to consist in three interrelated

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114 As is often the case in modern depictions of the ancients, the main point of interest is less in the historical accuracy of their accounts, and more in the way in which they clarify the thinker’s understanding of the modern world. Hence I do not spend time on defending Hegel’s depiction of the polis. Forster, however, offers some reasons to treat Hegel’s account as historically valuable. See Ch. IV of Forster (1989).
facts. First, the citizens of the polis agreed on the norms that govern their lives, at least on the most fundamental. Second, the verdict of the community about normative questions was immediately accepted as sufficient justification. Individuals did not have the need for any justification beyond the fact that this is the way we do things, so to speak. Third, the norms of the community were not conceived as different from the life that they governed. Citizens did not conceive of themselves as having particular “customs”, in the sense that other customs were possible, hence that the same (human) life could be governed by different sets of norms. In more contemporary idiom, we could say that there was no sense that one’s understanding of the world was mediated by one’s particular conceptual scheme. In such conditions of intimate identification between the individual and her community, skepticism could not take hold.

In different texts Hegel offers different accounts of the decline of this blissful unity between the individual and her community, about which he talks—reminiscent of his school friends Schelling and Hölderlin—in terms of the biblical fall from Eden. For my purposes, the reasons for the change matter less; I would rather stress the sense in which skepticism was the intellectual expression of this fall. Once the subject is confronted with contradictory norms—between different groups in the city, between religious and political authorities,\textsuperscript{115} between his culture and others—the individual becomes skeptical, that is, he increasingly sticks to his normative independence, standing back from the norms of the community. In Hegel’s narrative the early skeptics were individuals who completely fulfilled this

\textsuperscript{115} Hegel’s reading of Antigone’s story in the \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit} attributes much weight to this specific conflict, namely, between “human and divine law”.

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commitment to normative independence, thereby acting as teachers of sorts: they exemplified in their way of life a certain conviction that others were then to emulate.

However, ancient skepticism receives its distinctive shape only much later, with the emergence of the method associated with Agrippa (ca. late 1st century C.E.) and fully articulated by Sextus Empiricus. The earlier skeptics devised a set of ten argumentative tropes that were deployed in order to reveal conflicts between ordinary or “particular” assertions—for example, between customs in different cultures, or between how a certain color would strike a healthy or a sick person. In contrast, Agrippa offered five argumentative tropes that were supposed to replace the older ten. Two of them—the tropes of discrepancy and relativity—capture the spirit of the earlier tropes, but the other three go beyond the latter insofar as they express the idea that knowledge must have an absolute justificatory ground. They constitute what came to be called the “Agrippan trilemma”, according to which any judgment is either hypothetical (hence missing a ground), or opening a perpetual regress (for its ground needs a ground), or presupposes what it ought to ground (hence being viciously circular).116

Hegel is critical of Agrippan skepticism—not because he thinks that knowledge can be claimed without an absolute ground, but because Agrippa’s construal of the latter distorts its nature; it represents the Absolute as something external to the subject.117 Recall the discussion above (and in previous chapters)

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117 RSP 335. To be sure, Hegel doesn’t talk about externality but about finitude. Hegel’s problem is that the Agrippan dilemma posits the Absolute as something “finite”. However, if the Absolute is external to the subject, then it has an other (the subject), hence it is not-infinite or finite. So the two claims come down to one. Note, however, that presenting the problem as a problem with the externality of the Absolute already goes some way in explaining why it is a problem.
about organic unity: the absolute ground of a subject’s determination, what makes it a determination of the subject—his knowledge or action—is the fact that this determination expresses the purposive unity of the subject’s life-form. The purposive unity is not external to the subject; it defines him as a member of this life-form—it is essential to him. His claim to knowledge is ultimately grounded in his confidence that he knows in the way that a member of his life-form ought to know, that he followed a set of norms that articulate what membership in his life-form consists in. However, once the subject conceives of himself as independent of any life-form—as the skeptic does—he cannot but represent the norms of his life-form—what would normally serve as grounds for his judgments—as external to him. No norm is an ultimate ground since at no point is there a moment of identification with a norm.

An example should clarify what I have in mind. Say I claim: “Zeus got Hera pregnant”. I am then asked to support this knowledge-claim. I may say: “a priestess in Delphi told me so.” For the Agrippan skeptic, the latter claim is not an absolute ground; it invites yet another plea for justification, e.g., “how do you know that the priestess knows the truth?” However, for a member of this life-form, it is clear that the priestesses in Delphi always know the truth. There is no moment of reflection, as it were, but of identification. We could say that the norm “if a priestess in Delphi makes a knowledge-claim, then believe her” articulates what membership in this life-form consists in (among many other norms, obviously). Since the skeptic, being abstractly free, avoids identification with a life-form, he can only represent such
norms as external to him, hence he would always seek yet another ground; no ground would strike him as absolute.

While the conditions for Agrippan skepticism arise with the decline of the Greek polis, it reaches its full bloom in the Roman Empire. For Hegel, it is not a piece of historical contingency that this skepticism happened to be broadly practiced in this period. Indeed, he seems to suggest that there is an explanatory link between the ethical order and this philosophical outlook.

The key ethical novelty of the Roman context, in Hegel’s diagnosis, was the emergence of abstract right or “personality” in the legal code. The notion of abstract right squares with Agrippan skepticism in at least two inter-related respects, the first of which is quite straightforward: abstract right actualizes the skeptical commitment to full normative independence. As Hegel has it in the Spirit Part of the Phenomenology, describing the collapse of the Greek way of life, “[personality] stepped out of the life of the ethical substance. It is the independence of consciousness, an independence which has actual validity” (PhG ¶479).

In enjoying the status of a person, I am in principle free to determine myself in any manner that I want, simply because I choose so; there is no unconditioned norm to which I am essentially subject. The communal norms, which in the Greek polis were conceived as essential to the self-conception of its citizens, hence as absolute, are now represented as external limitations on the person’s freedom. Hegel depicts the Roman Empire, in reference to his discussion of skepticism, as a “time of universal fear and bondage” (PhG ¶199). This statement is not to be primarily understood as a point about the evil nature of the Empire but about its
mode of control. The political order is not an object of trust and identification for its subjects but rather an unavoidable fact of sorts. Its subjects must take the political order into account—and hence follow its laws or norms—but without endorsing them as absolute, as essential to who they are.

Similarly, the Agrippan skeptic conceives of himself as independent of any norm whatsoever, and represents communal norms as external limitations. If his behavior betrays the fact that he, in practice, follows the norms, it is not to be interpreted as consent or endorsement. After all, the skeptic—like the person—does not recognize any absolute principle that could serve as ground for such endorsement.

Importantly, in so far as the Agrippan skeptic, committed to abstract freedom, conceives of himself as having full normative authority, he cannot conceive of his freedom as bound with an essential norm. Therefore, the Roman skeptic construes the Absolute as external—in line with the Agrippan trilemma. As if the only manner in which he can conceive of a norm is as an external *limitation*, rather than as an essential or constitutive element of his freedom. Indeed, the skeptic remains agnostic about the question whether there is an unconditioned ground or not (on this question, too, he suspends judgment). Still, even the mere idea of a normative ground that is essential to subjectivity as such is at odds with personal freedom, with full normative independence. This is Hegel’s explanation, I suggest, to Agrippa’s misrepresentation of the Absolute.

But there is another respect, less straightforward, in which personal freedom squares with Agrippan skepticism: both the person and the skeptic demand
recognition of a private sphere. This demand is explicit for the person. His freedom is paradigmatically exercised by owning a sphere of private property—things with which he can do whatever he wants. The content of his property, what he owns, has no bearing on this right. If I own a piece of land, for example, I can use it in any way that I fancy. That in my community there are ideas about what makes sense—or is respectable—to do with one’s land does not affect my right.

While such a demand to a private sphere is not explicit for the skeptic, it seems to tacitly inform his ordinary and philosophical practice. Thus, to insist that he expresses—and lives according to—appearances, just means that the skeptic expects others to grant him a sphere that we may call a sphere of “private experience”. Like communities usually have conventional norms about how to treat objects, so communities have norms about how to treat behaviors and utterances. When you behave in a certain way, let alone speak, you are expected to do certain things that follow from it, e.g., justify your assertions. By insisting that their experience consists of mere appearances, the skeptics negate such conventional norms; indeed, they treat them as just conventional (rather than as unconditioned) hence as not committing. We may say, then, that the skeptics apply abstract right to experience. It is this consideration, I believe, that makes sense of Hegel’s obscure yet curious assertion that “[l]ike skepticism, the formalism of legal right is by its own nature without a peculiar content of its own; it finds before it a manifold of existence in the form of ‘possessions’, and, as skepticism did, stamps it with the same abstract universality”, whereby it is called ‘property’” (PhG ¶480).
These two commitments, to normative independence and to private experience, reveal Agrippan skepticism as ethically grounded in the Roman ethical order. Skepticism, Hegel says, “could only appear as a universal form of World-Spirit” in the Roman period (PhG ¶199). The relation between the ethical order and the philosophical (or skeptical) outlook has a number of aspects. While I want to move on to the modern case—which is, after all, in the center of my argument—I will sketch three such aspects, since they all apply to the modern context as well.

First, the Roman ethical order grounds Agrippan skepticism in the sense that the latter *expresses* the former, or rather: makes explicit tacit presuppositions of the ethical order. This is one way to make sense of Hegel’s well-known dictum that “philosophy is its own time comprehended in thoughts” (*ihre Zeit in Gedanken erfaßt*; PhR 21). Philosophy comprehends its epoch, I suggest, by generating a certain self-consciousness for its epoch, laying bare what is normally a tacit presupposition. The skeptic, by avoiding any positive determination, makes explicit the Roman person’s commitment to utter normative authority. Similarly, by treating all content as “appearances”—forced upon him from outside—the skeptic makes explicit the alienated relationship between the Roman person and his social institutions. To the extent that an expression is explained by what is expressed, then we can say that Agrippan skepticism is *explained* by the ethical order. And I believe, indeed, that we have a much better understanding of an utterance, let alone a

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118 To be sure, the direct subject of this statement is stoic philosophy, but Hegel shortly makes it clear that stoicism and skepticism are two sides of the same coin. The same ethical conditions are coupled with both outlooks.
treatise, once we know more about the speaker or the writer and the circumstances of the utterance.

Second, the Roman ethical order grounds Agrippan skepticism in the sense that it makes it socially and materially possible. To see what I mean, consider the following uncontroversial claim: (1) a functioning, enduring social order is possible only if the majority of its subjects follow a set of norms, e.g. they pay taxes or exercise control over some of their desires, say desires that risk the life or livelihood of other subjects. So far so good. The ancient skeptic rather seems to be a perfectly obedient subject; he does whatever he is required to do. If he is hungry, he eats; if he is asked to pay taxes, he pays. However, the analogy between these cases rests on projecting on social institutions a similar endurance that we attribute to sensations like hunger. To represent ‘paying taxes’ as a constraint, something which forces itself on me, I must assume that there is a power behind it—a power that enforces this requirement, a power that will even punish me if I do not meet the requirement. This consideration leads to a second claim: (2) skepticism could only be practiced in a social setting in which some people are not skeptics, namely, the people who exercise power which is necessary in order to maintain social order.\(^{119}\) However, from the point of view of the skeptic, the subject (or subjects) who exercises power cannot be rational, in the sense that his activities are not such that other subjects may endorse upon reflection. For, the skeptics—obedient as they are—are precisely

\(^{119}\) The literature on ancient skepticism is rich with discussions on the question whether the skeptic could genuinely live his skepticism (e.g. Frede [1997] and Burnyeat [1997]), but the no-less-interesting question whether one (or others) could live with the skeptic, or whether a self-sufficient community of skeptics is possible, is neglected. I take Hegel to be interested in such questions precisely. He has no doubt that the skeptic’s life reveals a self-contradiction, but (as in other instances, for Hegel), self-contradiction is not necessarily a problem. The more interesting question, for him, is whether this contradiction is ethically productive and how it plays into the larger historical and ethical situation.
not moved by reasons. A third claim follows: (3) skepticism could only be practiced in a social setting in which social authorities exercise their power in an arbitrary, irrational manner—and this, indeed, is Hegel’s characterization of the Roman Empire. To be sure, claim (3) might seem suspicious. An Agrippan skeptic could live in an ideally rational modern state, in which subjects do endorse social institutions upon reflection; the skeptic could simply avoid endorsing them. However, only in an irrational state—like the Roman Empire—could skepticism be widely practiced and taken to reveal a certain truth about this order, namely, be a “universal form of World-Spirit”.

Third, the Roman ethical order grounds Agrippan skepticism in the sense that the latter serves the former. What is the point of Roman personal freedom? Avoiding positive determinations in the public sphere while maintaining one’s freedom in a limited private sphere of personal property. What is the point of Agrippan skepticism? Show that positive determination is futile and that there are no public or shared grounds—grounds that have validity for others—for taking actions and claiming knowledge. Therefore, the performance of the Agrippan skeptic and his intellectual message, as it were, serves well the Roman person’s attachment to the private and aversion to the public sphere.

A similar explanatory link, I will now argue, holds between modern personal freedom—the kind freedom exercised in modern civil society—and modern skepticism. While abstract—and moreover, personal—freedom informs both sorts of skepticism, in modernity the ethical context allows for and encourages subjects to positively determine themselves vis-à-vis other subjects. Such positive
determination, as I argued in the previous chapter, is coupled with a commitment to knowing the world in a definite manner—a manner that generates the dogmatic-skeptical fusion typical of modern skepticism.

**PART 3: Personal Freedom and Modern Skepticism**

**The Purpose of the Modern Skeptic**

Let us approach modern skepticism via yet another observation about the ancient variety. I have argued that ancient skepticism is coupled with a conception of content as external and non-conceptual—in line with Sextus’s *phasisomena*. Hegel offers the following instructive elaboration. The consciousness of the ancient skeptic, he says, is:

> in fact nothing but a purely casual, confused medley, the dizziness of a perpetually self-engendered disorder. It is itself aware of this; for it itself maintains and creates this restless confusion. Hence it also admits to it, it owns to being a wholly contingent, single, and separate consciousness—a consciousness which is *empirical*, which takes its guidance from what has no reality for it, which obeys what is for it not an essential being, which does those things and brings to realization what it knows has no truth for it (PhG ¶205).

Hegel uses a variety of terms—confused medley, disorder, restless confusion, single, contingent, separate—that convey the lack of unity in the ancient skeptic’s experience. Bearing in mind the discussion in the previous section, we can understand this lack of unity as a result of the ancient skeptic’s refusal to identify with a life-form. A life-form provides a principle of unity, in the sense that its members’ experience is governed by norms that realize their purposive concept. A
member of a life-form is not separate, single or contingent; rather, his experiences are necessarily determined in relation to the unity of which they are parts. In the absence of such unity, the subject’s relation to what is different from him—to content in general—can only be conceived as causal. The content externally determines the subject, who is totally receptive and passive with respect to it. The subject may act in certain ways as a result but without any intentional investment in the experience. In terms I offered above, the subject remains as an external observer of sorts, watching his body as if it were yet another material entity within a natural-mechanistic context.

Hegel’s characterization of the ancient skeptic’s consciousness as empirical and causal seems to identify ancient skepticism with a certain view of nature as a whole. Nature, according to this common view (that Hegel rejects but still admits its popularity), is not conceived as a teleological unity, in which any phenomenon is determined in relation to an essential purposive concept; rather, it is marked by "mutual externality", in which everything is external to everything else.\(^\text{120}\) To be sure, the ancient skeptics themselves would not acknowledge such a view—just like any other—as theirs. We can say, however, that they perform this view, effectively representing content as falling under such a conception of nature. In Hegel’s words, it is the ancient skeptic’s consciousness that "maintains and creates this restless confusion." Moreover, it is the ancient skeptic’s tacit commitment to abstract

\(^{120}\) E3 §381Z: “Wir wissen, daß das Natürliche räumlich und zeitlich ist, daß in der Natur Dieses neben Diesem besteht, Dieses nach Diesem folgt, —kurz, daß alles Natürliche ins Unendliche außereinander ist.”
freedom—to independence from one's life form—that explains why he is committed to performing this view.

Now, if the ancient skeptic is implicitly committed to a causal or mechanical view of nature, ancient skepticism suddenly appears to be similar, in a key respect, to modern skepticism. After all, the method of modern skepticism, as Paul Franks proposed, is the method of the natural sciences. What is the source, then, of their difference? Why is it the case that ancient skepticism remains skeptical about knowing any content whatsoever, while the modern skeptic is dogmatic about a certain range of content, namely, of reality as it appears to the subject?

The ancient skeptic suspends judgment about any item of content since, again, he is tacitly committed to abstract freedom, thereby seeks to avoid any self-determination. In the previous section, I argued that Hegel explains this commitment to abstract freedom in terms of the ethical conditions of the Roman Empire, namely, personal freedom which remains confined in the private sphere, faced with irrational political institutions. In the previous chapter I argued that, by contrast, the realization of personal freedom in modernity is encouraged and even required by social institutions. On the one hand, and like in the Roman period, modern personal freedom asserts the normative independence of the individual, but on the other hand, it does not remain purely abstract or negative. Civil society, and especially the economic market, is a space—secured and regulated by relatively rational ethical institutions—in which the modern individual is expected to realize himself as independent. Since the modern individual conceives of himself as a person, namely, as independent of any life-form, his freedom is necessarily realized.
by arbitrary or immediate identification with items in the world. That is, the modern individual takes himself to freely identify with items just because he so wants or resolves, regardless of (or unmediated by) any norm.

Individual freedom in modernity, then, goes beyond mere abstract freedom. It is practical in the sense that the modern person must positively determine himself in the world by identifying—or taking possession of—real items. Therefore, the exercise of personal freedom is essentially bound with a certain conception of reality and of the appropriate manner to cognize it. Only items that are real in terms of this conception are appropriate objects of personal freedom. What is this conception? Insofar as the person conceives of himself as independent of any life-form, he is committed to representing items as utterly external and non-conceptual in the sense I defined above. An item is real insofar as it is immediately and simply "there", regardless of the subject’s relation to it. Accordingly, the subject must conceive of his relation to a real item as externally determined. I conceive of myself as knowing the item only if I remain utterly receptive with regard to it.

I can now introduce my main point in this section. Since personal freedom in modernity goes beyond abstracting from one’s life form—since it must realize itself by identifying with real items—the tacit view of nature that characterizes ancient skepticism must become explicit. What is only a conception of content and the subject’s relation to it for the ancient skeptic, must become a conception of reality and cognition for the modern person. Therefore, once we conceive of the modern skeptic in terms of his ethical conditions, namely, as a modern person, we understand why he is committed to the method that Franks attributes to modern
skepticism, namely, the method of the natural sciences. It is by pursuing this method that the modern skeptic represents reality as a possible object of personal freedom.

Note that my argument provides, then, something which is lacking in Franks’s characterization of modern skepticism, namely, a positive purpose that their alleged method is geared to achieve; it thereby reveals an analogy and even a continuity between ancient and modern skepticism. The purpose of ancient skepticism is abstract freedom, and for that reason the skeptics employ the famous tropes, namely, arguments that prevent them from committing to any content whatsoever. By analogy, the purpose of modern skepticism is personal freedom, and for that reason they employ the method of the natural sciences—a method that is geared to establish the reality of contents as possible objects of arbitrary will. This analogy is based on a continuity, that is, a basic similarity in the underlying conceptions of freedom, which are nonetheless differentiated because of the different ethical conditions in the Roman context versus the modern West. In both cases, I should note, the underlying purpose is tacit—the subject himself is not aware of it—but it nonetheless makes sense of his praxis. (To be sure, the ancient skeptics do have a conscious purpose, ataraxia, but we explained it in terms of a deeper and tacit purpose, namely, abstract freedom.)

Finally, my ethical account of modern skepticism makes sense of a key feature thereof, which both Forster and Franks ignore. As Stanley Cavell and James Conant have argued, the modern skeptic is not able to retain his skeptical conviction in the face of ordinary life.¹²¹ This sets the modern skeptic in sharp contrast with the

¹²¹ Conant (2004), 107; Cavell (1979), Part II: Skepticism and the Existence of the World.
ancient skeptic, who has devised ways to maintain a total detachment from ordinary dealings. My account does not only make sense of this contrast but makes it the cornerstone of other contrasts. It is because the modern skeptic is committed to practical life—this is what commitment to modern personal freedom means—while the ancient skeptic is not, that the latter remains zealously skeptical while the former commits himself to a great deal of knowledge.

We can now examine in more detail the necessary connection between modern personal freedom and the method of modern skepticism (or the natural sciences). This would allow us, in turn, to offer Hegel's theoretical—and more importantly (for my purposes), ethical—critique thereof.

The Method of Modern Skepticism: Matters of Fact

Let us recall what the method of modern skepticism, according to my construal of Franks, consists in. First, it proceeds from a set of Tatsachen, matters of fact that the subject cannot or should not doubt, and not because they are taken to be justified (in a sense I will shortly explicate). Second, the method proceeds by way of discovering general laws or principles that mechanically explain these matters of fact. How do both these points follow from modern skepticism, once we understand it in terms of a tacit commitment to personal freedom?

The person, or the subject committed to personal freedom, must take some contents as real, for only in that case could he then realize his freedom by identifying with those contents. Or to put it differently, the person must posit a limit to his freedom so he could then overcome this limit. The notion of Tatsachen
perfectly captures the conception of reality and cognition that the person is committed to, and this for two reasons. First, a Tatsache doesn’t count as real in virtue of its relation to the subject. The relevant contrast is with the contents that comprise a life-form. For a member of a life-form, an item of content is real (partly) because it follows from the concept of this life-form that the member is to relate to this item as real, as having normative bearing on his practice. For the person, insofar as he conceives of himself as independent of any life-form, an item could only count as real qua external, that is, as obtaining independently of his subjective relation to it. A Tatsache is precisely what is real in this sense.

Accordingly, and this is the second reason why this notion is bound with personal freedom, cognition of a Tatsache—representing it as real—is a matter of external determination. Something is a Tatsache because it strikes me as true, forces itself on me in an allegedly unavoidable manner. The relevant contrast is with the notion of justification. Franks distinguishes, in this context, the method of the natural sciences from that of traditional metaphysics, in which the truth of contents is justified in reference to "first principles", what Hegel calls the Absolute, the Unconditioned or the Rational.\footnote{Franks (2008), 56.} In the Encyclopedia, Hegel fleshes out this distinction in terms of a contrast between "knowing that an object is", and knowing its "substantial nature" (\textit{substantielle Natur}; E3 §445Z, Hegel’s italics). Given his teleological construal of the Absolute or the Rational—and the claim that the Absolute is that in terms of which something is justified—we can understand justification as follows. A justification is an answer to the question why in the
peculiar sense for which citing a purpose—the purpose of that which is justified—would serve as an answer. To justify an entity, then, is to show how its form and existence serve a purpose, ultimately the purpose of the world as a whole. We comprehend the “substantial nature” of this entity insofar as we understand its role in this purposive unity. This shows why the notion of justification is theoretically precluded for the modern skeptic, given his commitment to personal freedom. Insofar as justification appeals to a purposive order, it presupposes that the subject takes himself to fall under this order. But the person takes himself to be independent of any purposive unity, hence to realize his freedom arbitrarily—that is, not by justifying its exercises in terms of an essential purpose of the subject. Therefore, the person is precluded from using the notion of justification in this sense. The notion of a Tatsache squares with personal freedom since a Tatsache is represented as true not because it realizes some purposive concept—that is, because it is justified—but just because it is, externally determining the subject. I take Franks to confirm this point, when he says that modern skepticism is skeptical not about knowledge per se but about justification or logos, that is, about our ability to ground knowledge-claims in an absolute teleological principle.\footnote{Franks (2008), 58.}

The grounds for taking something to be a matter of fact change from one modern skeptic to another, but different accounts share a key feature: the relativization of the Tatsache to the subject, rather than grounding it in (or justifying it by) an absolute principle. I have mentioned Schulze, Hegel’s chief representative of modern skepticism, who says that such facts are true since we, subjects, cannot
doubt them anymore than we can doubt our own subjective consciousness. Descartes famously offers a similar defense for the *cogito ergo sum*: I cannot but accept this truth, even upon finding reasons to suspend judgment about anything else (including what strikes other skeptics, like Schulze, as most evident). In the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel outlines another typical grounding for the truth of *Tatsachen*, namely, that it is not only one subject but very many of them who cannot but represent these contents as true; there is, then, a widespread *agreement* over them.\(^\text{124}\)

These accounts relativize *Tatsachen* to the subject (or subjects), and it is this relativization that is taken to ground their reality or truth. This transition, from relativization to truth—which is typical of modern skepticism—highlights its stark difference from ancient skepticism. After all, in the ancient skeptical context, a relativization of a claim to the subject is a reason to suspend judgment, rather than to accept the claim as true. Hegel sides with the ancient skeptics, stressing that agreement between subjects is always temporally and culturally conditioned. “When we grant validity to immediate knowing,” he says, “then all can suit themselves and everything is justified, for each person can subjectively and immediately know something different” (LHP 255). For instance, while the reality of

\(^{124}\) PhG ¶69. In Chapter IV, I elaborate on this idea, which Hegel takes to be part of a method he deems “argumentative thinking”. A reading of Richard Popkin’s classic *The History of Skepticism from Erassmus to Spinoza* shows how popular this form of vindication (and I avoid the term “justification”) was for what various early modern skeptics took to be (relatively) true. Thinkers like Pierre Gassendi, Marin Mersenne and David Hume have distinguished between the substantial or inner nature of things—our knowledge of which is in radical doubt—and lawful patterns which we can (scientifically) know and suffice for guiding our practical life and attaining goals like “security”, “prosperity” or “happiness”. And this is often bound with the idea of agreement between all subjects, or rather all “reasonable” subjects. Pierre Chanet, a 17th Century doctor, writes that there are some judgments “that one must be insane to doubt their certainty” (Popkin [1954], 122).
the Christian God seems to be widely agreed upon, “the Hindus and the Egyptians
have known just as immediately that God is an ox or a cat.’’

But much as Hegel is critical of the modern avowal of Tatsachen—“immediate
knowledge” [unmittelbares Wissen; LHP 254] as he calls it—I am more interested in
the light that it sheds on his diagnosis of modern epistemology and modern
freedom. "This is the most universal standpoint [allgemeinste Standpunkt] of our
time. Its characteristic is immediate knowing," he says in the Lectures on the History
of Philosophy, adding that "[t]his immediate knowledge is individual knowledge, it
belongs to each individual, [to the] individual as such" (ibid.).125 My account of the
ethical conditions of modern skepticism begins to make sense of this connection
between individuality as such and commitment to "immediate knowledge" or
Tatsachen. The modern individual, being committed to personal freedom, must
accept the truth of some contents, and not by acknowledging teleological principles
that would be at odds with his alleged arbitrary freedom. Representing an item as
ture because it so strikes his subjective consciousness, externally determining him
from outside, meets this condition.126 Recall, in this connection, Descartes in the end
of the first Meditation. He finds it so difficult to remain in a state of utter doubt,
suspending judgment about all beliefs. Whereas a similar condition was so desired
for the ancient skeptic, a modern skeptic—since he tacitly seeks to realize his
freedom—must entertain the evil demon hypothesis in order to remain in this state,
and even then it hardly remains stable.

125 “Dies unmittelbare Wissen gehört jedem Individuum an.”
126 Chapter IV elaborates on Hegel’s understanding (and critique) of “immediate knowledge”.
So far I have addressed the question, how the ethical actuality of personal freedom explains the modern avowal of matters of fact, the first part of modern skepticism’s method in Franks’s construal. I will now address the second part of the method—finding general principles that mechanically necessitate the presumed matters of fact. I shall argue that it is part of the attempt to establish the undeniability of *Tatsachen*.

I take Hegel to make this argument in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology, Sense Certainty*. The next section will lay out Hegel’s dialectic, making explicit something that remains implicit at the outset of the *Phenomenology*, namely, the experiencing subject’s practical striving (I thereby draw on my argument in Chapter I, albeit with a different emphasis).

**The Method of Modern Skepticism: A Mechanistic Nature**

It is striking—albeit not a coincidence—that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* starts off with a subject who holds the very same conception of reality and knowing that I attribute to the modern skeptic. The subject takes content to be real just in virtue of being there, striking his consciousness. In the same vein, this content is taken to obtain independently of the subject, externally determining him.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I have argued that this identity between the standpoint of modern skepticism and the initial phenomenological subject is rooted in the nature of the phenomenological project. If we read the *Phenomenology* in its systematic context—a context missing in the 1806 book but made explicit in the *Encyclopedia*—we see that the phenomenological consciousness
emerges from the essentially practical nature of the human individual. Thus, consciousness—the business of representing the content of the subject’s life-form as external to the subject—is a necessary aspect of the human individual’s striving to normative independence from his life-form. However, while this striving marks the human organism as such, regardless of time and place, Hegel takes it to be especially pertinent to the modern individual. In the chapter on the Enlightenment he says that consciousness in this period is again "sense certainty", that is, the very first phenomenological shape. This is the case, I suggested in Chapter II, because the modern individual has the confidence—cultivated within modern civil society—to *stick* to his claim to independence, rather than “forget” about it and return to "child-like unity with the world," as Hegel calls it. It is for this reason that the *critique* of this standpoint—as Hegel presents it in the first part of the *Phenomenology*—specifically addresses his modern readers. The similarity between the standpoint described there and the modern experience of his readers makes it the case that the latter are prone to identify with Hegel’s protagonist, the phenomenological subject. Insofar as the readers, as moderns, identify with this subject, they are also open to accept Hegel’s critique of him.

In the current section I will limit my discussion to the first chapter, Sense Certainty, as it shows why—given the subject’s conception of reality—he must go beyond his avowal of *Tatsachen*; he must also find alleged mechanistic principles that necessitate them.

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Sense Certainty lays out Hegel’s critique of the following conception of reality and knowledge: an item of content is *immediately* real, that is, regardless of its relations to any other item, and therefore, we know an item insofar as we represent it as such, that is, without relating it to any other item. For example, I know that there is a tree in front of me by representing the tree, regardless of its relations to its vicinity. Note that this conception is naïve, for if I happen to represent a tree but it is not in an appropriate context—say not outside, or in a balcony, and/or connected to the ground—I would probably dismiss the experience as a chimera. Hegel’s discussion in Sense Certainty starts off with such a naive conception of reality in order to show the necessity of incorporating "universals"—the patterned or lawful relations between single or immediate items—into our conception of reality.

The argument proceeds by way of showing the change and difference that permeate the cognitive subject’s experience. The subject claims that “now is night” and a few hours later that “now is day”; he says that “here is a house” and shortly after that “here is a tree”. Why is it the case that the difference between the experiences, between night and day for example, amounts to a failure on part of the subject? An answer emerges if we assume that the subject is tacitly committed to modern personal freedom. Given this commitment, he represents content as external, as obtaining independently of his relation to it. But if the content changes whenever he utters a knowledge-claim, it seems that the content, rather, is *dependent* on the subject. The experience failed because it failed to demonstrate the
independence of the content that the subject represented. So far I am only rehearsing my argument from Chapter II.

By bringing the subject to make opposing knowledge-claims—claims that posit different and even mutually exclusive contents as real—Hegel’s narrator follows the method of ancient skepticism. Given that knowledge-claims change relative to the subject, the ancient skeptical conclusion would be the negation of both claims—thereby generating the desired suspension of judgment and ataraxia. Hegel even alludes to this possible conclusion in the end of Sense Certainty, when he mentions the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries. The members of this school, like the ancient skeptics, have held that determinate contents are “nothing”, rather than aspects of an independent reality. Yet, this option, which was alive and even desirable in the ancient context, is left behind in the phenomenological progression.

We understand why this option is left behind, I suggest, once we take into account the subject’s commitment to modern personal freedom. Unlike the ancient skeptic, the modern skeptic is committed not only to abstract freedom—to independence from one’s life-form—but also to identifying with real items in the world. Therefore, the modern skeptic must retain his commitment to an independent reality. In the face of the change and difference in the contents that seem real to him, he doesn’t conclude that they are not real; rather, he modifies his conception of reality. Thus, reality is still conceived as external to, or independent of, the subject (in line with personal freedom); Yet, it is no longer conceived as immediate or particular but rather as “universal”, as a structure with different or particular elements. That is, an item is taken to be real in virtue of its relations to
other items that *together* comprise an independent reality. For example, the "night" and the "day" are now real not as immediate items but as aspects of the same unified reality. By finding the principle or law (the "universal") that makes it the case that sometimes a night obtains and sometimes a day does, night and day no longer seem to be relative to a subjective knowledge-claim; they are rather represented as manifestations of the same objective unity. This conclusion, again, is typically modern, since it follows the commitment of the modern person to claim the reality—in the sense of external to the subject—of at least *some* content. By contrast, the option of forsaking this challenge altogether, of *avoiding* a claim to determinate knowledge, is dismissed.

The move from knowledge of the immediate to knowledge of universals—of that which mediates or relates together the seemingly immediate content—shows why the second part of the method of modern skepticism completes the first. Thus, since *Tatsachen* are deemed real in virtue of their relation to the cognitive subject—because they strike him as true—the advocate of *Tatsachen* must account for the difference and change in the way contents strike different subjects (or even the same subject). By pointing to principles or laws (namely, "universals") that explain these differences as aspects of the same (independent or objective) reality, the modern skeptic defends the reality of matters of facts.

It is crucial to see that from the point of view of the modern skeptic—given his conception of freedom—the "universals" that explain *Tatsachen* cannot be teleological principles, final causes. I’d like to approach this point via Susan
Neiman’s discussion of an intimately related matter in her *Kant and the Unity of Reason*.

Neiman highlights Leibniz’s rejection of the mechanistic construal that Spinoza had given to the principle of sufficient reason. For Leibniz, a universe explained only in terms of efficient causes remains arbitrary and unintelligible. Full intelligibility must involve our most intimate categories, those with which we make sense of our own subjective activity. Therefore, he posits a good God that has created for us the best of possible worlds. Kant, she argues, rejects Leibniz’s teleological ontology since knowing the universe as purposive would violate subjective freedom. Instead of producing its own purposes, as it should, subjective reason would acknowledge itself to fall under an external purpose. Kant thereby profoundly modifies the notion of Reason that he inherited from Leibniz and the pre moderns. Reason is not primarily an objective purposive order of the universe, combined with a subjective capacity to intuit this order and act accordingly. Rather, reason is a subjective “active principle”, one that produces purposes for rational subjects that they can then realize within a non-purposive or mechanistic nature. Kant’s reformed notion of reason, she suggests, is meant to make room for subjective freedom in modifying and reforming the objective world (he thereby follows Rousseau). This is the reason, she claims, that Kant distinguishes between reason and the understanding. The understanding is the capacity to record being as it is—as necessitated by mechanistic principles—while reason is the subjective principle of activity vis-à-vis this brute being.127

127 Neiman (1994), Ch. I: Historical Sources.
While Neiman’s discussion is focused on Kant, I find it highly relevant to my own argument, since it highlights a typically modern logic. A subject who is committed to personal freedom—to independence of any purposeful unity—is precluded from explaining his experience in terms of final causes. Such a subject can accept—and, I argue, even needs—limits on his freedom (in order to “overcome” them), but he rejects the notion that it is essential to what he is—hence to realizing his freedom—to realize a certain purpose. It is against this backdrop that we are to understand the connection between modern skepticism and the method of the natural sciences. This method is designed to reveal nature as an aggregate of brute facts that externally determine the subject, that is, to posit a limit on personal freedom that the person could then overcome. Incidentally, this shows why, for Jacobi, modern science and Spinoza fall in the same basket.128 Both conceive of the universe as a mechanistic unity, lacking a purpose—or as the “realm of power”. It is a necessary aspect, I suggest, of the modern subject’s commitment to personal freedom.129

By representing reality as devoid of purposes, as the “realm of power”, modern skepticism does not only affirm the normative independence of the modern person, but also provides him with an image of nature that legitimizes its unbounded exploitation; it reveals nature as mere “utility” [Nützlichkeit]. Hegel uses the latter term in his account of the Enlightenment in the Phenomenology [PhG

128 See Jacobi (1789), 419-420n and Jacobi (1799), 62-64. Bowman (2012) has recently argued that Spinoza’s notion of substance is “the truth of sense certainty,” the result of its skeptical crisis.
129 To be sure, Kant’s conception of freedom goes beyond personal freedom. It points to purposes and norms that essentially apply to a free subject. While I don’t deny it, the discussion should show that personal freedom, too, entails a mechanistic conception of nature.
[579], relating this image of nature to the modern reenactment of sense certainty, which is, in turn, inseparable from modern skepticism. While this conception of the relation between man and nature—as a relation of ownership and utilization—might strike us as trivial, Hegel’s argument suggests that it is historically and culturally specific. We can contrast it, say, with traditional ideas of man as a steward or guardian of nature, or with contemporary environmentalist demands to regard nature or natural entities as possessing rights or a sort of freedom.¹³⁰ The problem with such alternative conceptions of nature is that they compromise the modern person’s absolute authority with respect to nature and his ability to treat it as mere means for realizing his goals. By contrast, I argue, the modern scientific image of nature as devoid of freedom, as the realm of blind power, serves the self-conception of the modern person and his conception of what is other to him.

At this point I can address an apparent discrepancy in my characterization of modern skepticism. When I first introduced Franks’s argument—and in a few points later on—I said that the modern skeptic is skeptical in the sense that he doubts our ability to know reality as independent of the subject—reality in-itself in contrast to reality as it is for consciousness. But, in a few places, I have argued that modern skepticism is skeptical in the sense that it doubts our ability to justify our knowledge-claims (or other determinations) in reference to a teleological principle. I can now argue that, if we bear in mind the modern skeptic’s commitment to positing the reality of some contents—the former characterization of his skeptical

¹³⁰ A view that has concrete political consequences. Only recently the New York Times has reported that a river in New Zealand was declared a “person” under the pressure of a local aboriginal community and environmental groups. (https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/14/world/what-in-the-world/in-new-zealand-lands-and-rivers-can-be-people-legally-speaking.html).
side follows from the latter. Thus, say an item X is present to my consciousness. If I conceive of myself as a member of a definite life-form, then—insofar as my relation to X is mediated by certain norms—I am entitled to claim knowledge that X. If I see a red surface but not in a context in which the concept ‘red’ applies in in my life-form, then I shall probably dismiss it as a chimera; if it does fit in, then I will claim that I see red. By contrast, if I am an ancient skeptic, I will avoid making any knowledge-claim, including the claim that X. But what if I am a modern skeptic? I do want to claim that X, but, since I am independent of my life-form—hence do not conceive of its norms as absolute grounds for justifying my knowledge-claims—I can only claim this knowledge without justification, namely, dogmatically or immediately. X is real as a Tatsache. Yet, what am I then to say regarding the fact (that Hegel is never tired of pointing out) that there are differences in the way reality strikes different subjects (and even the same subject). At this point, as we saw above, the modern skeptic can deploy his post-Kantian naturalism (to use Franks’s phrase), and account for these differences in terms of underlying natural laws. However, this does not make the representation thereby formed—reality for many, or even all, subjects—any less subject-relative. To put it differently, there is nothing necessary about this picture of reality. If other subjects happened to exist, they might have had other representations, other contents that they would treat as Tatsachen. Our picture of reality then threatens to appear as a contingent subjective projection (recall, in this connection, the argument on the person’s inherent skepticism in Chapter II). The way to deal with this predicament is to assume that there is an
element of reality, the in-itself, which it utterly external to—and independent of—the subject, but that nonetheless forces representations on the subject.

This train of thought is based on Hegel’s critique of Schulze in his early skepticism essay. He attacks Schulze for completely “forgetting” what the Rational is; rather than a principle of justification, Schulze conceives of it as a thing that causes our representations without us knowing how and why (RSP 317). I am suggesting that this misconception of the Absolute (or the Rational) is the result of doubting our ability to justify knowledge. For, (1) once this doubt in place, our knowledge-claims only have recourse to subject-relative matters of fact. Then, (2) in order to avoid the specter of subjective projection, we have to assume that there is an ultimate element of reality that causes these matters of fact to strike our consciousness. The relation is represented as causal, since a purposeful relation would be at odds with personal freedom. Finally, we cannot know this ultimate element of reality, since if we knew it, it were a subject-relative item, and we would need to posit yet again an ultimate, independent, element of reality. So it is not an empirical or a contingent failure that prevents this knowledge from us; it is, rather, a logical or necessary problem, ultimately grounded in a commitment to utter normative independence.

**Summary: The Logic of Modern Skepticism**

My discussion of modern skepticism proceeded from two accounts that I find unsatisfying. Michael Forster’s account points to the modern skeptical fusion of dogmatism and skepticism but fails to say something more specific about the nature
of its dogmatism and skepticism. What, typically, does the modern skeptic claim to know, and what does he claim not to know? How (or on what grounds) is the boundary between knowledge and doubt drawn? I sought an answer that goes beyond pointing to a contingent similarity between some modern skeptics; rather, I wished to offer an answer that is rooted in the modernity of the modern skeptic, in his being "a child of his time" (PhR, 21).

Paul Franks makes an important step in this direction by claiming that the modern skeptic, like his ancient counterpart, is committed to a method, namely, the method of modern natural sciences. One could suggest, then, that the modernity of the modern skeptic is reflected in his inability to deny the success of modern natural science and in his dismissal of metaphysics. While the modern skeptic is skeptical about reality in-itself, the Absolute or the Unconditioned—the traditional object of metaphysics—he is dogmatic about the undeniable results of natural science.

However, this chapter in particular—and my dissertation in general—adopts a different order of explanation. Can we rather explain the modern skeptic's commitment to natural science as following from his self-conception, namely, from what it means, for him, to realize his freedom?

My positive answer proceeds from the idea that the modern skeptic, like his ancient counterpart, is committed to abstract freedom, namely, independence of one's life-form. As such, the modern skeptic represents any content whatsoever as utterly external and non-conceptual, that is, as existing and having the character that it has, independently of the subject's relation to it. As the modern skeptic is also committed to personal freedom, to realizing himself by identifying with real items in
the world, he strives to prove his conception of content, that is, to know items as real under this conception. Only items that are so real are possible objects of personal freedom, that is, objects for arbitrary identification, ungoverned by norms (as is the case, by contrast, with members of a life-form).

In knowing nature as a mechanistic context—by employing the method of the natural sciences—the modern skeptic attempts to realize this purpose. The method proceeds from matters of fact, contents that externally determine the subject, and goes on to discover general principles that mechanically explain these facts. Insofar as the modern skeptic can explain his experience as determined by an external nature, his freedom is limited but not annulled. That is, he remains arbitrarily or immediately free and can “overcome” these limits by taking possession of real items. By contrast, any attempt to explain the subject’s experience by teleological principles presupposes that the subject is a member of a purposive (rational) unity, and this would be at odds with personal freedom. The subject would simply no longer conceive of himself as personally free if he were to acknowledge such an external purpose.

Having said that, Hegel believes that modern skepticism is theoretically and ethically flawed. In the next (and last) section, I point to some of its more severe affects. They all have to do with the daunting presence of nihilism. In the Conclusion, once we have Hegel’s critique of skepticism in place, I will make explicit a few respects in which the modern ethical order grounds or explains modern skepticism.
PART 4: The Nihilism of the Ordinary

Jacobi’s Heritage

The threat of Nihilism looms large on Hegel’s intellectual epoch. In 1786, in a letter to Moses Mendelssohn, Jacobi claimed that Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the popular Enlightenment playwright, was a secret follower of Spinoza. He thereby initiated a controversy that would shape the consciousness of a generation. The personal details matter less for my argument; the philosophical point matters a lot. Jacobi has argued that Spinoza’s system, and, for that matter, any rigorous rationalist program, must lead to atheism, namely, to denying the existence of a personal, free God—the transcendent God of Christian revelation. It is for this reason that the controversy was usually referred to as the Pantheismusstreit. It extended, however, far beyond the question about God’s existence. Pantheism denies, just as much, the existence of any particular entity, including human individuals and all the rich fabric that animates their ordinary lives, the elements that populate their ordinary vision of the world: nights, days, trees, houses, loves, regrets, blades of grass. It therefore amounts to radical, all-permeating nihilism.

In his remarks on Spinoza in the Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Hegel explains the sense in which pantheism denies the existence of particular entities. The problem is that pantheism denies their necessity. Spinoza fails to explain why, once we posit an all-encompassing substance, we even have particular entities. To be sure, Spinoza doesn’t deny that there are, in some sense, particular entities, that is, there are things that we represent as particular. But here lies the problem: he
takes this fact from “representation”, that is, from how we, human subjects, view the world, and then explain them as “negations” of the substance. But in so doing, these entities are conceived as conditioned on our subjective, even bodily, perspective, rather than as a necessary part of objective reality. Reminiscent of Jacobi’s discourse, Hegel doesn’t shy away from countering this view in the name of feeling. “Spirit is, and is no mere privation or negation. In the same way freedom is, and is no mere privation,” he says, adding that “this actuality is set against the Spinozistic system” and “based, for one thing, upon feeling.” (LHP 161)\textsuperscript{131} We can be sure that we, as free individuals, exist, because we feel it, and the same applies to other aspects of our ordinary vision of the world. But, for Hegel feeling is necessary but insufficient. He ultimately posits an all-encompassing substance that is also a subject, namely, a universal that particularizes itself. It is this “vital” metaphysical principle that makes it possible to explain the great particular richness of the world as emanating from a necessary, unconditioned—rather than conditioned on our subjectivity—principle.

A substantive consideration of Hegel’s solution to the problem—that which he detects (following Jacobi) in Spinoza’s system—is beyond the scope of my discussion. This section will focus, then, on the problem, for which Itzhak Melamed has recently given a vivid illustration, at least for a key aspect thereof:

In our daily experience we dissect the world we encounter according to what appear to us as natural units, such as chairs, windows, zebras, prime ministers, porcupines, clouds, etc. Similarly, we “dissect” time into years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, and seconds.

\textsuperscript{131} Hegel’s italics.
Although in our daily experience we hardly think of the way we measure and “dissect” time, it is clear that our temporal units are simply arbitrary. A day could have been divided into ten hours, rather than twenty-four, and an hour could have consisted of, say, five hundred and three, rather than sixty, minutes. Indeed, in cultures other than our own (or even in earlier periods of western culture), we can easily find other temporal divisions. Apart from dividing time arbitrarily, we also designate certain periods of time as “special” times, i.e., festivals, birthdays, days of mourning, etc. When one disregards the significance of these dates to the human-centered point of view (as Spinoza would), it appears that all these taxonomies and designations of time are baseless, i.e., they have no true ground in the real nature of time. Similar problems arise with regard to our way of dissecting space. Our customs, laws, and moral intuitions treat certain regions of space as real units (e.g., cities, states, families, human beings, and cats). Obviously, for us, a human being and a sausage made out of that human being are not the same unit or the same individual (even if precisely the same atoms constituted both). But if we could ask the lion’s opinion, he would probably care little about the fact that the former has self-consciousness, while the latter lacks it. From the lion’s point of view, it may well be that a human being, a corpse, and a human sausage are the same individual. It may as well be that, from this point of view, three and a half human beings and one monkey would together constitute one individual (would not three tomatoes and half an onion constitute one salad for us?).

In the following I focus on three aspects of nihilism that I take to have direct ethical—and not only theoretical—implications. I will argue that modern skepticism is nihilistic since it (1) denies the necessity, and hence the reality, of the ordinary

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132 Melamed (2010), 84.
world; (2) generates alienation and yearning on part of some subjects; (3) denies the reality of individual freedom; and (4) creates the subjective conditions for what Hegel calls wrong [Unrecht], namely, crime or transgression of communal norms.

**The Elimination of Ordinary Reality**

We can approach Hegel’s critique of modern nihilism via a point he makes in the Perception section of the encyclopedic Phenomenology. Perception explores the conception of reality with which Sense Certainty concludes, that is, that the real is the “universal”, a structure that mediates items of content that are only seemingly independent or immediate. While the subject concedes that knowing involves relating various items as to represent the "universal" or their mediated structure, a crucial feature of his conception of cognition is carried over from Sense Certainty. Knowledge is still based on how the world strikes the subject. Universals, the lawful relations between items, are supposed to explain this subjective vision.

In the Encyclopedic version, Hegel identifies the standpoint of perception with that of Kantian philosophy, and with "our ordinary consciousness and more or less of the sciences. The sensory certainties of individual apperceptions or observations form the starting-point; these are supposed to be elevated to truth, by being considered in their relation.” The elaboration in the Zusatz—leading to Hegel’s main critique—is instructive:

Although perception starts from observation of sensory material, nevertheless it does not stop there [...] but necessarily goes on to relate the sensory to a not immediately observable universal, to cognize each individualized entity as an internally coherent whole—in
force, for example, to unify all the expressions of force—and to seek out the relations and mediations obtaining between individual things. While therefore sensory consciousness only shows things, i.e., merely exhibits them in their immediacy, perception by contrast apprehends the interconnection of things, demonstrates that when such and such circumstances are present such and such follows from them, and thus begins to demonstrate things as true. This demonstration, however, is still defective, not a final demonstration. For that by which something is here supposed to be demonstrated is itself a presupposition, consequently in need of demonstration; so that in this sphere one goes from presuppositions to presuppositions and lapses into the progression to infinity. This is the standpoint occupied by experience. Everything must be experienced. But if we are supposed to be talking about philosophy, then we must rise above the demonstration that remains tied to presuppositions, above empiricism's demonstration, to the proof of the absolute necessity of things (E3 §422Z).

Hegel is being especially—and not so typically—lucid here. Perception is about explaining sensory content—the way in which the world (immediately) strikes consciousness—by discovering structures, relations or laws that explain this material. It thereby contributes to establishing the perceived reality of this content. In Hegel's lingo, the universal that perception is after is the conditioned universal, the universal conditioned on the subject, and it is the only universal that the natural

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133 Hegel's point here poses an exegetical challenge since it seems to be at odds with his argument in the Jena Phenomenology. In the latter, Perception seems to be limited to immediately observable universals (like things or objects), while only the next chapter, Understanding, deals with "theoretical" non-observable principles like natural laws. This is Robert Brandom's view in his unpublished commentary Spirit of Trust (2013). I believe, however, that Brandom is wrong, and his mistake reflects an effort to downplay the less savory (for a contemporary "analytic" reader) metaphysical elements in Hegel's argument. The encyclopedic Phenomenology reveals the real stakes also in the Jena version: the distinction between Perception and the Understanding is not between observable and non-observable principles, but between subjectively conditioned and unconditioned principles. A non-observable principle can still be subjectively conditioned. This is the case with mechanical laws.
sciences, empiricism or Kantian naturalism can reveal (all these standpoints are the same in the relevant respect, namely, in espousing this method). This universal, however, is defective for the following reason.

The standpoint of perception is unsatisfying—and hence also the standpoint of modern skepticism—because it is incapable of properly demonstrating the very reality of the perceived content. To recall, insofar as the modern skeptic is committed to personal freedom, he is committed to representing content as external to him, that is, as obtaining independently of his relation to it. But perception never quite attains this goal, for it proceeds from content as it appears to—or strikes—the subject, that is, from precisely this relation, rather than from an independent principle. Therefore, it fails to provide knowledge of unconditioned reality, reality in-itself rather than how it is for the subject. In other words, perception is "defective" since it is essentially bound with skepticism: the knowledge it provides is always relative to the subject, rather than knowledge of independent reality.

This point appears to be quite abstract, in the sense that it hardly seems like something that would bother an ordinary individual, a non-philosopher. To be sure, since I showed that the commitment to knowing an external or independent reality follows from personal freedom, then the failure to know it constitute an immanent contradiction for a subject who conceives of himself as personally free. However, as I argued in the previous chapter, a contradiction is not, in itself, a problem for the individual. Hegel admits that personal freedom as such is a contradiction but one, I suggested, that enlivens and empowers the individual insofar as it motivates him to overcome this very contradiction. Therefore, the problem of skepticism about the
Unconditioned or the in-itself, seems to be primarily theoretical or philosophical. As many modern skeptics show, it was commonly believed that one could have a perfectly happy and prosperous life even while acknowledging one’s inability to know the “real nature of things”.134

Even Hegel—whose commitment to absolute knowing couldn’t be stronger—hardly dismisses the limited or conditioned knowledge that modern science does offer. “Of course,” he says,

even isolated, i.e. mindless intuition [...] can provide cognitive satisfaction; what is in physical nature the fundamental determinacy—self-externality, exhibiting the moments of immanent reason external to each other—can occur in the intelligence [...] But true satisfaction, one admits, is provided only by intuition permeated by intellect and Spirit, by rational representation. (E3 §445R)

Mindless intuition is what our senses provide insofar as we consider them without the conceptual activity that is coupled with membership in a rational life-form. Indeed, they provide only knowledge of nature as “mutual externality”, as lacking a (purposive) principle of unity that makes it “necessary”. And still, Hegel admits that it offers some cognitive satisfaction, even if not a full or true one. We can assume that such cognition is satisfying because it suffices for many human needs. But why does it fall short? Is it just a theoretical point? And could this have to do with the fact that Hegel uses an ethically charged term like “satisfaction” [Befriedigung]?

134 Cf. Popkin (1954), Ch. 7.
In the following I will argue that, indeed, it is not only a theoretical point. There are at least three respects in which the nihilism inherent to modern skepticism has ethically problematic implications.

**The Subjective Miseries of Arbitrariness: Yearning and Alienation**

To begin, nihilism is ethically problematic since it renders our ordinary vision of the world arbitrary, in the sense that it relativizes it to our subjective standpoint. In Spinoza’s case, as we saw, it follows from the notion of an all-encompassing substance which is not “vital” as Hegel would put it, that is, which does not produce its own particularization. To be sure, Spinoza is hardly a skeptic, but his system is still similar, in the relevant respect, to modern skepticism. Since the typical modern skeptic assumes that there is an independent reality but that we cannot know how this reality in-itself determines our subjective vision of the world (reality for us), the predicament is the same. This vision is rendered relative and hence arbitrary.

But, the problem of arbitrariness does not only arise from typically modern skepticism about the relation between unconditioned and subjectively conditioned reality. Even with regard to knowledge that the sciences do offer us, so on the level of subjectively conditioned knowledge, we experience a sense of arbitrariness. Consider the following point that Jacobi makes in two separate letters to Fichte:

> We comprehend a thing whenever we can derive it from its proximate causes, or whenever we have insight into the order of its immediate conditions. What we see or derive in this way presents us with a mechanistic context. For instance, we comprehend a circle whenever we clearly know how to represent the mechanics of its formation, or
its physics; we comprehend the syllogistic formulas, whenever we have really cognized the laws to which the human understanding is subject in judgment and inference, its physics, its mechanics; or the principle of sufficient reason, whenever we are clear about the becoming or construction of a concept in general, about its physics and mechanics. The construction of a concept as such is the a priori of every construction; and at the same time our insight into its construction allows us to cognize with full certainty that it is not possible for us to comprehend whatever we are not in a position to construct. For this reason we have no concept of qualities as such, but only intuitions or feelings. Even of our own existence, we have only a feeling and no concept. Concepts proper we only have of figure, number, position, movement, and the forms of thought. Whenever we say that we have researched a quality, we mean nothing else by that, save that we have reduced it to figure, number, position, and movement. We have resolved it into these, hence we have objectively annihilated the quality. 135

Hegel would hardly agree that we only have a "feeling of our own existence", or that we are lacking concepts for qualities. But he would agree, I take it, that we lack such concepts insofar as we try to comprehend—begreifen (conceptualize)—the world independently of the subject, that is, precisely in the way that the natural sciences seek to comprehend it. By contrast, by assuming a unity between the human subject and her world—as constituting a rational life-form—we can adequately understand the particular elements of the world as they strike subjective consciousness. For example, to repeat the familiar Brandomian example, we do not understand what 'red' is, unless we know that X is red only if it is thereby also

135 Jacobi (1789), 419-420.
colored, and that it cannot be, at the same time, green. Similarly, we do not understand what a 'table' is, unless we know that a table is something one could use in certain ways. A human subject, in turn, is that which is responsible to follow such (conceptual) norms, and if she does not follow them, she falls short of realizing her purposive concept as a member of a life-form.

John McDowell makes a similar point in his *Values and Secondary Qualities*. He concedes that something is red in virtue of a "microscopic textural property of its surface", so a knowledge-claim that something is red is true (if it is true) in virtue of this property (that is, by a property revealed by natural science). But, this does not tell us in virtue of what this knowledge-claim is understood to be true. This, in turn, must involve the notion that this thing has the disposition or power to look red to a subject.136 In other words, abstracting from the way in which a thing appears to a member of a life-form—as the natural sciences do—eliminates the intelligibility of this quality.

However, the notion that subjects and their world form a unity—constituting a rational life-form—is at odds with personal freedom. It is for this reason, I argued, that modern skepticism subscribes to the method of the natural sciences and attempts to explain reality without considering the role of rational subjects in determining it. Jacobi is drawing our attention to the price that this method exacts. The way the world phenomenally strikes us is "objectively vernichtet," as he puts it.

This point seems to oscillate between two distinct claims: is it the case that the method of the natural sciences eliminates the reality of the phenomenal world,

136 McDowell (1998), 134.
or, rather, only its *intelligibility*? But we can have both. Insofar as the natural sciences' explanations of the phenomenal world fail to explain the quality that we actually experience, their method leaves these qualities unintelligible. This is the case since the scientific method—in its effort to represent reality as it is independently of the subject—loses touch with the way the world is experienced by subjects within definite forms of life. Next, the scientific representation of the world is unreal in the sense that its alleged reality is not, after all, grounded in an objective principle, one that is independent of the subject. To put it figuratively: the modern skeptical race towards representing an utterly external reality is doomed to fail, yet in its failure it gradually eliminates the intelligibility of our ordinary image of the world.

Next, the relativization of the ordinary world to the subjective standpoint renders the world arbitrary. To be sure, the very notion that the subject has a role in determining or constructing her world does not, by itself, entail that her world is arbitrary. This is the case, I argued, also for members of a life-form. But if a subject conceives of herself as such a member, her role in constructing the world seems to be nothing but arbitrary; rather, it is a norm-governed activity which realizes her essential purpose. By contrast, if the subject conceives of herself as personally free, and hence of human will as arbitrary, she must conceive of exercises of the will as arbitrary, including any role it has in constructing the ordinary world. The ordinary world, then, comes to be conceived as an arbitrary subjective projection.

In Chapter II, I discussed the concluding paragraphs of Sense Certainty. Hegel offers there a vivid illustration to this last point. Let me briefly revisit my argument.
In Sense Certainty, to recall, the subject attempts to represent the contents that strike his consciousness as external or independent. This attempt fails, and the chapter ends with the conclusion that these contents are “nothing”, that is, precisely with the nihilism of the ordinary world. “Even the animals,” Hegel claims, are not shut out from this wisdom but, on the contrary, show themselves to be most profoundly initiated into it; for they do not just stand idly in front of sensuous things as if these possessed intrinsic being, but, despairing of their reality, and completely assured of their nothingness, they fall to without ceremony and eat them up (PhG ¶109)

The failure to establish the reality—in the sense of external and independent—of “sensuous things” ends up in a subjective projection, namely, in treating these things as food. They are food because the animal treats them as food. This determination—call it ‘foodness’—is not an aspect of the objective world but a subjective imposition on the world. To be sure, one could argue that the animal thereby reveals an aspect of the objective world. Obviously, not any entity can serve as food, and those that do exhibit ‘foodness’, are such independently of the individual animal’s treating them as such. However, the issue here (and not only here, but in my dissertation at large) is less the ontology of the world but subjective conceptions thereof and how they bear on subjective attitudes. While animals don’t have a conception of the world, I take Hegel’s anecdote to exhibit the following point. Insofar as a subject conceives of himself as personally free, he conceives of himself as an animal. His behavior, accordingly, is conceived not as norm-governed but as arbitrary. He does not know that certain entities are food, that is, applies a
concept to them in accordance with the norms of his rational life-form. Such knowledge would have removed the anxiety from his behavior. He could stand idly in front of these entities. But, the immediacy and anxious character of his behavior betrays the fact that he does not know these entities as food. It is rather an arbitrary imposition that might “work” (insofar as these entities would indeed nourish him) or not.

Having said that, the relativization of the ordinary world to a personally free subject—much as it entails arbitrariness—does not mean that the subject would actually experience a problem, or rather: it is not to say this arbitrariness would amount to a subjective misery. Thus, arbitrariness, in the first place, is a property of a subjective self-conception. Insofar as a subject conceives of himself as personally free—as not committed to any essential norms—then he conceives of his freedom and (therefore) of the world as arbitrary. However, as I argued in the previous chapter, the modern individual enjoys a large degree of self-confidence in his arbitrary freedom. He might not be bothered by the fact that it is arbitrary. Still, Hegel is well aware the possibility or threat of subjective distress which arbitrariness may give rise to. In the Preface to the Phenomenology he says that

> [c]onsciousness misses in the newly emerging shape its former range and specificity of content, and even more the articulation of form whereby distinctions are securely defined, and stand arrayed in their fixed relations (PhG ¶13)

The newly emerging form is the modern world—“a new born child” as Hegel calls it in the preceding paragraph—and what the subject yearns for is the sense of necessity and firm grounding that the details of his worldview, much as the relations
between them, used to have had in the pre-modern world, that is, when subjects had conceived of themselves as members of a rational order that has lent their worldview what it now lacks. The yearning, then, seems to appear on the background of comparing modern arbitrariness “with the wealth of previous existence”, which is “still present to consciousness in memory.”

What is lacking, then, in the modern age? Or rather, why does the lack of grounding lead to subjective distress? The answer lies in the idea that the human subject, according to Hegel, needs to feel at home in the world (PhR §4Z). In the past he has allegedly enjoyed this sense. Grounding his ordinary image of the world in a teleological principle made the world a home in at least two senses. It made this world appear as stable and longstanding, and it made it seem as if it were built and designed for the subject. Without such grounding, the world loses its homeliness, as it were, and the result is a sense of alienation.

To sum up, the modern individual, insofar as he conceives of his freedom as arbitrary, would conceive of his ordinary image of the world as arbitrary, namely, as a subjective projection. This, in itself, does not necessarily lead to misery, but it is coupled with a constant threat of misery, of alienation and yearning for less-alienated times. Next I will discuss another respect in which nihilism is ethically problematic, namely, since it also threatens individuality as such.

**The Elimination of Individuality**

The second respect in which modern nihilism is ethically problematic is bound with the first. After all, our very individuality is rendered arbitrary—like other elements
of our subjective image of the world—once the method of modern skepticism is practiced. Insofar as modern skepticism represents nature as a mechanistic context, this also implicates the human individuals that are part of it. Indeed, even cognition is conceived as a mechanistic relation: The idea is that we know something since the object of this knowledge externally determines us. Recall, in this connection, Hegel’s description of the ancient skeptic as a "confused medley", lacking any principle of unity. If any determination of the subject is an external determination, in what sense is a determination a determination of the subject?

A real individual can only be determined, according to Hegel, as a member of a (universal) unity. As a member of a life-form, a human individual has her determinations in virtue of her role in realizing the purpose which is the principle of this unity. As a mother, for example, she believes certain things and performs certain actions that are appropriate to her place in this unity. Her ownership of a range of determinations, then, is mediated by norms that are essential to her membership in a life-form. But, insofar as we represent nature as “mutual externality”, as the skeptic does, there are no norms that would ground the relation between an individual and her alleged determinations.

To be sure, the individual takes certain determinations to be his determinations—not because they are essential to what he is, but rather because he so (arbitrarily) wills it. For example, as a personally free subject I take myself to have a body with various properties, to be a student or a lawyer, Jewish or Muslim, atheist or religious, to believe in socialism or capitalism or anarchism. These are all determinations that I may own as an exercise of my arbitrary will. Other subjects,
moreover, may recognize me as their owner and thereby buttress my sense of ownership and authority. However, insofar as I am committed to personal freedom, I cannot conceive of the relation between these determinations and me as grounded in the nature of things, namely, in an (independent) principle that grounds my (subjective) taking them to be my determinations. While many modern individuals, according to Hegel, are equipped to retain a sense of individuality—by owning a range of determinations—also without such objective grounding, the fact that this sense is arbitrary constitutes a constant threat. It may be asked at some points: why being a student, if it’s not the case that I ought to be a student? Why being a father, if it’s not the right or the natural thing to be (for a subject like myself)? The lack of grounding, as I said above, may give rise to alienation and yearning for better times.

Importantly, the threat coupled with arbitrariness does not only concern my ability to own determinations, but also my very being a source of authority, that is, something that can own or will in the first place. Since I am committed to personal freedom, I represent any content as external, and hence as part of a mechanistic context. But then, indeed, I am a “confused medley”, a series of events with regard to which I am only an external observer. I could believe that I am in some privileged position with regard to these events, that they are my events or constitute my life, but this belief itself appears to be yet another event in this series. The fact that other subjects may agree with me that something is mine (also) because I take it to be mine, doesn’t remove the haunting suspicion that it is all a subjective chimera—if not privately mine then ours, collectively—a story human beings tell themselves in order to avoid the hard truth.
On the face of it, the stakes in the last few paragraphs revolve around an old question: does a mechanically construed nature leave room for human freedom? While this impression is basically correct, it is too vague. The problem that I am pointing to—call it the nihilism of individual freedom—is not the problem of free causation. The problem is not that individuals cannot be taken to cause or affect any event or series of events in nature since nature is already fully (mechanically) determined. In fact, Hegel in the first place does not conceive of freedom in these terms; freedom is not about causing events to happen, but about the extent to which we can identify with events. Accordingly, the problem of nihilism concerns this ability—including our ability to identify with ourselves as sources of normative authority.

The arbitrariness of our ordinary image of the world—including our individual freedom—may be a problem only for some individuals. The next (and last) subsection briefly addresses the ethical problems that are related to over confidence in one's arbitrary freedom.

**Subjective Conditions of Wrongdoing**

For a member of a rational life-form, the norms of the community are essential to what she is. The norms do not limit her freedom but rather guide her in realizing the freedom proper to her. But what if she comes to change her self-conception, what if she now conceives of herself as an abstract individual? The norms of the community are thereby represented as external, hence as limitations on her freedom. This is the

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137 For a clear formulation of this idea see Pippin (2009), 6.
source, I will now argue, for another ethically problematic aspect of modern skepticism. It generates the subjective conditions for transgression of communal norms, what Hegel calls wrong \([Unrecht]\).

Consider the following norm: “if S has children, S ought to take care of them.” Inasmuch as we conceive of S as a member of a life-form, this norm is a norm of freedom, a norm of autonomy. In realizing this norm, S is realizing his purposive concept as a member of this life-form. He operates according to his own proper laws. But if S comes to conceives of himself as an abstract person, this norm is rendered external or given. He could represent the fact that, in his community, such a norm obtains in the sense that most or all subjects follow it. However, this would be analogous to representing the fact that natural phenomena in his vicinity exhibit lawful patterns. In both cases, the fact that it happens is not by itself a ground for him to do something or, more generally, to determine himself in one way or another. As a person, to recall, he exercises his will arbitrarily.

What could make S determine himself in accordance with this communal norm? S may avow this norm. He may choose to follow it because he wants to. Indeed, very many parents choose to take care of their children and they don’t experience it as a limitation of their freedom; rather, they feel that they thereby fulfill themselves even if they cannot ground this feeling in some essential purpose of theirs. Alternatively, S may follow this norm because he has to, that is, because it is forced and/or enforced on him—that is, insofar as it \(limits\) his freedom. This way of thinking about the relation between S and the norm squares with the ancient skeptical conception. In response to claims that they could not live their ordinary
lives—for living involves avowal of determinations—they have argued that they live in a certain way since it was forced on them, that is, because they were externally determined in this way. This point reveals an analogy between communal norms and laws of nature. In both cases, the subject becomes an external observer of sorts, watching his body moving about—be it falling because of the law of gravitation or paying taxes because of tax laws. That it is hardly plausible to conceive of tax laws on the model of the law of gravitation is beside the point. The ancient skeptic is not concerned with stating the truth about norms or laws of nature. He has an ethical purpose, namely, the atraxia involved in abstract freedom, and for this reason he insists on a conception of content that serves this purpose.

For the modern skeptic, as we have seen, things are more complicated. On the one hand, he must represent contents as real, for only then he has possible objects for realizing personal freedom; on the other hand, these contents cannot be real in virtue of a rational unity of which the subject is a member. I argued above that the method of the natural sciences constitutes an attempt to keep both these commitments. By practicing this method, the modern skeptic represents content as real just in virtue of being there—externally determining his consciousness—so not in virtue of being justified in terms of a teleological or rational principle. The modern skeptic, given his conception of freedom, is committed to this method both in the natural and in the social spheres. These spheres do not differ in this respect, namely, in the fact that they are both represented as a set of matters of fact [Tatsachen], whose alleged reality is buttressed by mechanistic laws. Consider, for
example, Hegel’s remarks on Hugo Grotius, which appears immediately after saying, by way of concluding his lecture on John Locke, that

metaphysical empiricism has on the whole become the foremost mode of treating issues of cognitive knowing in England and in Europe; and what we in general call the sciences, and in particular the empirical sciences, have this procedure as their origin. This scientific method is the observation of objects and the investigation or drawing out their inner law. (LHP 178)

This description of the method of the natural sciences—which squares with my construal of modern skepticism—is then attributed to Grotius, who applied it, according to Hegel, both to “physical objects” and to “political and legal objects.” Grotius, he says, conducted “wholly empirical compilation of the behavior of people towards one another, coupled with empirical argumentation.”

In the Preface to the Philosophy of Right, Hegel derides what he calls “the self-styled philosophy” of the “so-called philosophers”, citing Jakob Friedrich Fries as “the leader of this superficial brigade”. Fries was a post-Kantian naturalist, who Hegel frequently associates with Schulze, his prime example of a modern skeptic. In other words, we can identify his object of assault with this general outlook. And what are they assaulted for? They “expressly state that truth itself cannot be known” and hence their “distinctive mark” is “hatred of law”. And Hegel elaborates: “The form of right as a duty and a law is felt by it [this outlook] to be a dead, cold letter and a shackle; for it does not recognize itself in the law and thereby recognize its own freedom in it” (PHR 16-17). By contrast, they champion the notion that “truth consists in what wells up from each individual’s heart, emotion, and enthusiasm in
relation to ethical subjects, particularly in relation to the state, government, and constitution.”

On the face of it, empiricists like Grotius and these modern skeptics are opposites. Grotius empirically explores historical human communities in order to articulate the universal principles that they have shared, and then to present these commonalities as what is right and good. By contrast, these modern skeptics treat existent laws—no matter the extent to which people agree on them—as limitations on freedom and identify the seat of right and good with individual feeling. But the discussion so far allows us to recognize that both outlooks (so Grotius as well) share the structure of modern skepticism, a structure that I have been explaining as an aspect of modern personal freedom.

Insofar as the subject is committed to personal freedom, he represents all content as external and independent of him. Social norms, then, are represented as regularities in the ways in which human beings behave and have behaved, that is, not as essential to freedom but as limitations of freedom. Such norms, then, are *Tatsachen*—and hence we are not to deny them—but only insofar as we can show that they are grounded in natural laws. This is the project of social empiricists like Grotius. Note, however, that like in the case of the natural sciences, it gives us only subjectively conditioned knowledge, that is, only a representation relative to our subjective standpoint; hence this method is coupled with skepticism about reality in-itself, or “truth itself” as Hegel puts it in the *Philosophy of Right*.

Furthermore, and like in the case of natural science, the project of social empiricism is doomed to fail, and then we get the nihilistic idea that social reality is
not necessary, that it is ultimately arbitrary, and, therefore, that we can arbitrarily exercise our will vis-à-vis social norms. After all, they are nothing but limitations or “shackles” on our freedom.

In other words, this typically modern skepticism about ethical truth has the following nihilistic consequence: wrongdoing, namely, transgression of communal norms. “[B]y declaring the cognition of truth to be a futile endeavor,” Hegel continues,

this self-styled philosophizing has reduced all thoughts and all topics to the same level [...] As the result the concepts of truth and the laws of ethics are reduced to mere opinions and subjective convictions, and the most criminal principles—since they, too, are convictions—are accorded the same status as those laws.

I have said, however, that modern skepticism does not generate wrongdoing but only the subjective conditions thereof. This is the case since crime can still be prevented by strong political authorities that enforce the law, no matter to what extent subjects experience the law as dead, limiting and ungrounded in the truth itself. Alternatively, I may follow the law since it serves my personal interest. However, the first motivation may give rise to the other ethical problems that I have discussed above, that is, to a sense of alienation. It turns human beings, again, into objects of sorts: I follow the law not because it is good, or right, or because I love my fellow citizens, but because I would be punished if I didn't. As for the motivation of self-interest—while it is surely very powerful in modernity, the next chapter will draw attention to its limits.
Conclusion

This chapter elaborated an ethical account of modern skepticism, an account that understands this philosophical outlook in terms of socio-political conditions peculiar to modernity. Contrary to current literature on the subject, my account finds continuity where others find a break. The first, and fundamental, continuity is between the ethical order and the modern skeptic. The modern skeptic is not only the Cartesian loner who can exercise his skepticism only by breaking with ordinary life. Or rather: this withdrawal from ordinary life—and the outlook it gives rise to—ends up serving the practical interests of the modern ordinary person. The second continuity I have argued for is between ancient and modern skepticism. This continuity is revealed, again, once we pay attention to the similarity (much as the difference) between the ethical conditions that generate them.

Both varieties of skepticism proceed from what Hegel calls abstract freedom. While the human individual is naturally or immediately a member of a form of life, he has the capacity to abstract from this form of life, thereby conceive of himself as independent thereof. Once a subject conceives of himself as so independent, he represents the norms of this life-form as external to him, as part of an independent objective reality. He comes to conceive of cognition as the business of demonstrating that reality is so independent of him, forcing itself on his consciousness that must remain passive and receptive in the cognitive process. So far this recap does not go beyond my argument in Chapter I. To recall, it is how I explained the emergence of the phenomenological consciousness from the anthropological standpoint (which is still marked by unity with one’s life-form). As such, this account highlights a
potential possessed by any human individual, according to Hegel. However, the human individual normally forgoes the commitment to normative independence—
independence from one’s life-form—and returns to “child-like unity with the world”. The skeptic, by contrast, sticks to this commitment, and it makes him doubt our ability to justify knowledge in terms of an absolute principle. For, any such justification must include a moment of identification with the principle, namely, a unity of the subject with a life-form, rather than abstract freedom.

Different varieties of skepticism can be understood in terms of this basic commitment to normative independence or abstract freedom. I have argued that ancient skepticism—and specifically the variety Hegel associates with Agrippa—follows this commitment to the extent that it altogether avoids positive determination, including claims to knowledge. For, any claim to knowledge presupposes an ultimate ground that, given the skeptic’s commitment to abstract freedom—amounts to identifying with an external norm, and is therefore at odds with abstract freedom. This radical commitment to normative independence is facilitated by the ethical conditions of the Roman Empire. Abstract right, first introduced in the Roman legal code, ethically actualizes abstract freedom, while the oppressive and irrational character of the political authorities discourages positive determination in the public sphere.

While the modern skeptic similarly proceeds from a commitment to abstract freedom, the conditions of personal freedom in modernity are such that he must posit some content as real, so that he could positively determine himself in the public sphere. It is for this purpose that the method of modern skepticism—or of the
natural sciences—is deployed. With this method, the modern skeptic can represent reality as devoid of any normative significance—as brute matter that forces itself on the subject and could then be utilized by the arbitrary will of modern persons. However, this method can only provide a representation which is relative to the subject, so it generates the idea that, over and beyond this representation, there is a reality in-itself that forces this representation on the subject. While the modern skeptic is skeptical about that in-itself element of reality, he is dogmatic about representations provided by the natural sciences.

However, insofar as modern skepticism offers knowledge ungrounded in an absolute principle, it is bound with a constant threat of nihilism. The scientific picture of the world eliminates the intelligibility of one's ordinary picture of the world—that which is bound with membership in a definite form of life—and, ultimately, does not offer a real enough reality, as it were. Absent an ultimate principle that could ground this picture, one can feel it to be arbitrary and alienating. The modern individual, then—while mostly self-confident and engaged enough in his economic and private dealings to avoid the kind of reflection that brings about nihilism—may nonetheless fall in this pit, if only because the threat of nihilism is inherent to modern skepticism.

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I can now conclude by way of explicating three respects in which modern skepticism is grounded in the modern ethical order: modern skepticism (1) expresses or makes explicit tacit presuppositions of this order; (2) is made materially and politically possible by the relative rationality of modern Sittlichkeit;
and (3) serves the advents of modern personal freedom. (I follow the respects I defined in Part 2 in relation to ancient (Roman) skepticism.)

Modern skepticism expresses the modern ethical order in pursuing, and thereby making explicit, some key presuppositions of modern personal freedom. On the one hand, the modern skeptic typically denounces “external” normative grounds, namely, those that are available for subjects insofar as they are members of a life-form. Hegel stresses this point in his opening comments on Descartes, whom he takes to be the father of modern philosophy for initiating this anti-authoritarian enterprise. “The universal principle now is to hold fast to inwardness as such,” he says, “to set dead externality and sheer authority aside to look upon it as something not to be allowed” (LHP 132). At the same time, scientific knowledge—despite its problematic credentials, the fact it falls short of reality in-itself—is validated in the name of practical interests like “prosperity” or “well-being” or “utility”. Lecturing on Francis Bacon, Hegel says that “[v]alue is now accorded to what is present at hand [...] what constitutes the standpoint now is the sensible appearance [...] its utility and the like” (LHP 111). Richard Popkin characterizes this strategy as accepting “the full force of the skeptical attack on the possibility of human knowledge, in the sense of necessary truths about the nature of reality, and yet allows for the possibility of knowledge in a lesser sense, as convincing or probable truths about appearances.” He goes on to identify this lesser knowledge with the “scientific outlook”. A chief advocate of this strategy, Marin Mersenne, acknowledges that a rational or “metaphysical basis” for knowledge cannot be found, yet argues that there is a kind of knowledge “which is adequate for our needs
in this world.” By renouncing external authority, on the one hand, yet endorsing scientific knowledge for practical interests, on the other hand, modern skepticism makes explicit the two poles that constitute modern personal freedom as it is practiced and cultivated within civil society and the market economy. However, it also makes explicit something less palatable for modern persons, as far as they are engaged in their ordinary endeavors, namely, that their determinations do lack an ultimate ground.

Next, modern skepticism is made socially and materially possible by the relative power and rationality of modern *Sittlichkeit*. On the face of it, the reflection occasioned by modern skepticism could unsettle the socio-political order. After all, it reveals this order as ungrounded in an absolute principle, hence as potentially arbitrary and oppressive. However, the modern ethical order is strong and stable enough to survive such challenges. Hegel emphasizes that the modern philosopher—while he may entertain the most skeptical and subversive thoughts in the private sphere or in intellectual discussions—sticks to the demands of modern ordinary life, including fulfilling his roles in social institutions. Hegel attributes this duality—between skepticism and obedience—to the fact that “[i]n the modern era [...] worldly relationships have organized themselves in a way that is compatible with the nature of things, that is rational. This universal nexus, based on the understanding, is so powerful that every individual is part of it.” Therefore, he continues, “inner and outer can coexist as autonomous and independent. The individual is now in a position to relegate the outer aspect of life to the external

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138 Popkin (1980), 131-134.
order” (LHP 110). This point, I take it, is not only about the sheer power of the modern state. This, to recall, was also the case—at least to some extent—with political authorities in the Roman Empire. In the latter case, this power did secure obedience (and, therefore, was necessary for the practice of ancient skepticism) but it did not maintain the public participation and engagement of individuals. The modern state is not only powerful but also rational in the sense that its laws and institutions, according to Hegel, accommodate the individual’s needs. The modern skeptic can then engage in society despite the fact that, from his skeptical “private” standpoint, he knows—and even declares—that social norms lack the absolute grounding that norms in many pre modern societies seemed to have. Furthermore, Hegel constantly reminds us that what appears to modern individuals as natural and “immediate” is rather the result of a long historical cultivation, which is reproduced in the education that modern Sittlichkeit provides to its children.\textsuperscript{139} Therefore, it is not only the case that modern Sittlichkeit—by having institutions and norms that fit “human nature”—maintain the obedience and social engagement of its subjects; it is also the case that this very “human nature” is the result of historically and socially mediated Bildung. Without both these contributions of the modern ethical order, modern skepticism could not have been practiced widely and continuously for it would have brought down the social order.

Finally, the modern socio-political order is the ethical basis of modern skepticism also in the sense that the latter serves the former. The modern person strives to realize himself in civil society vis-à-vis other persons without thereby

\textsuperscript{139} See, for example, LHP 111, 255. Hegel stresses that ethical dispositions and beliefs are not “immediate” or natural but are the result of a long cultivation, both on the individual and the collective level.
losing his utter normative independence and acknowledge essential commitments to other people. Modern skepticism offers him a picture of the world—his individuality included—which perfectly serves these interests. If there are no absolute grounds for knowledge, nor are there absolute grounds that would compromise the individual’s utter authority to determine himself. Since the world (including human society) is represented as governed by natural, mechanistic laws, the modern person can use the world—realize his freedom—without saddling himself with commitments and responsibilities.

I can now move to the final chapter, which develops this concluding analysis. I show how, in Hegel’s account, certain features of modern civil society and the modern family serve to mitigate modern skepticism so that the threat of nihilism inherent to it remains as (just) a threat.
Chapter IV

The Necessity of Rupture and the Comfort of Unity: Towards an Ethical Remedy to Modern Skepticism

We are used to thinking of skepticism as a problem, and problems—it normally follows—should be solved or at least dissolved. This dissertation has challenged this presumption. Granted—and as the previous chapters have made clear—Hegel would agree that modern skepticism is a problem. In doubting our ability to justify knowledge while simultaneously claiming knowledge, the modern skeptic betrays a misunderstanding of what knowledge is. Moreover, knowledge without justification amounts to a fragile picture of reality—of both nature and our agency within it—a picture that occasionally strikes the modern individual as arbitrary and alienating. The threat of nihilism, then, is inherent to modern skepticism. So skepticism is definitely a problem, both ethical and theoretical. At the same time, my argument has raised doubts about the prospects of solving this problem. Insofar as the modern person is committed to his utter normative independence, and modern skepticism is grounded in this commitment, then skepticism is here to stay.

The present chapter works to establish this conclusion. It will argue not only for the inevitability of skepticism but also for its necessity, namely, the respects in which modern skepticism is necessary for a well-functioning modern Sittlichkeit. The chapter would then address a crucial question: if skepticism is necessary, how
are we to mitigate it, so that the threat of nihilism doesn’t materialize?

In order to show why modern skepticism is necessary, I begin, in Part I, with Hegel’s claim that modern individuals are committed to “immediate knowledge”. Standard interpretations of Hegel’s distinction between immediate and mediated knowledge understand it as a point in epistemology. I propose, in response, that an ethical account of immediate knowledge—an account that shows how it is grounded in the modern ethical order—would make sense of the claim that it is the modern individual who is committed to it. I interpret this commitment in terms of my account of modern skepticism. Commitment to “immediate knowledge” is a commitment to a worldview—scientific naturalism—within which knowledge is ultimately based on immediate, unjustifiable, matters of fact. Therefore, this commitment—like modern skepticism—is an aspect of the modern person’s claim to normative independence.

However, unlike the previous chapters, the argument doesn’t stop at the notion of individual independence. In Part 2, I show that the distinction between immediate and mediated knowledge has an analogy in the practical sphere, namely, in the distinction between immediate and mediated freedom. The modern individual is committed to immediate freedom for the same reason he is committed to immediate knowledge—namely, his claim to normative independence—and both are supported by the worldview of scientific naturalism. Building on this analogy, Part 3 argues that on the one hand, the idea that persons enjoy immediate freedom is an appearance. In truth, their freedom is only efficacious and determinate thanks to arrangements of modern civil society. On the other hand, this appearance is
necessary; it has key ethical functions within the modern ethical order. In fact, one way in which civil society mediates immediate freedom is by *sustaining* this appearance, namely, by helping modern persons ignore the respects in which their immediate freedom is (in truth) mediated. I then suggest that the modern commitment to immediate knowledge is not only analogous to the commitment to immediate freedom but also grounded in it. Claiming knowledge—and being recognized as a knower—is a way in which the modern person realizes his freedom. This suggests that immediate knowledge has, similarly, necessary ethical functions within modern *Sittlichkeit*.

The argument in Parts 1-3, while demonstrating the ethical necessity of modern skepticism, begins to answer the question asked above, namely, about the ethical arrangements that are to mitigate skepticism. For, the focus of the argument is the *dogmatic* side of modern skepticism—the commitment to immediate knowledge. The ethical arrangements within modern civil society that sustain this dogmatic side constitute a measure for mitigating skepticism. By bolstering the dogmatic side of skepticism, the danger that the sceptical side would lead to nihilism is partly contained.

However, much as civil society motivates modern persons to stick to their immediate freedom (and to the dogmatism coupled with it), its ability to shield them from nihilism is limited. Motivations like “self-interest” or “esteem” are not stable enough. In Part 4, I discuss the ways in which the modern family—and especially marital love—supports the struggles of persons in civil society, providing them with the grounding and higher purpose that they yearn for.
PART 1: Towards an Ethical Account of Immediate knowledge

In 1825 or 1826, Hegel was giving a lecture in Berlin as part on his regular history of philosophy course. “I know immediately about America,” he said, presumably meaning: I know that America exists. The point of the example was not, obviously, about America but about the nature of knowledge. Hegel was critiquing a view—represented by Jacobi—which he took to be typically modern. Contrary to this view, Hegel argues, “all immediate knowledge is also internally mediated. 140

If I am to see American soil immediately before my eyes, then this would first involve as a mediation my having made the journey there; first Columbus must discover America, ships must be built, and so forth, for all these discoveries and inventions play a part in my seeing. That I know it immediately is the result of an endless number of mediations. (LHP 256)

Since the locus classicus for Hegel’s distinction between immediate and mediated knowledge is Sense Certainty, the first chapter of the Phenomenology of Spirit, this distinction has been interpreted as a point in epistemology or the philosophy of mind, rather than in the context of Hegel’s social philosophy. After all, the cognitive subject in Sense Certainty—and, more broadly, in first part of the Phenomenology, Consciousness—is an isolated subject, abstracted from any social or political relationships. Let me discuss an especially lucid and systematic interpretation, the one offered by Robert Brandom. 141

To know immediately, according to Brandom, is to know not by inference. If we perceive or recall a fact, we know this fact immediately, rather than by inferring it

140 “Das unmittelbare Wissen ist so überall vermittelt.”
141 Brandom (2013), Ch. 4. Other “epistemological” interpretations are offered by Pinkard (1996), Westphal (2002), and Stekeler-Weithofer (2014).
from another fact. For example, I perceive (immediately know) that the table is red; I
do not infer that it is red from the fact, say, that it is scarlet. The content of what we
know, however, is always mediated in the sense that it wouldn’t have been
determined or intelligible if not for a conceptual inferential context. I may
immediately know that there is a red surface in front of me, but I know this only
because I also know that, if it is red, it couldn’t thereby be green as well, or that it
follows that it is also colored. Brandom distinguishes, in this connection, between
knowledge and what he calls reliably differentiating response. Some animals,
paradigmatically parrots, could have reliable responses to specific items of content.
A parrot could be trained to utter ‘red’ when it sees red. Yet, a parrot would not
thereby possess knowledge. Knowledge is the title of rational subjects who
command the rational inferential context in which content figures; they thereby
understand or comprehend what they know.

Hegel, in this reading, is a precursor of Sellars’s assault on this Myth of the
Given.¹⁴² No “bare” or immediate fact can be known at all; yet conceptually mediated
facts can still be known immediately, namely, not by inference. Brandom, then,
suggests a way to understand Hegel’s endorsement of immediate knowing while
insisting that knowledge is nonetheless “internally mediated”.

I do not deny that Hegel rejects the Myth of the Given, but I would like to
argue that Hegel’s take on “I know about America” should make us see that his
distinction between immediate and mediated knowing has aspects that go beyond

¹⁴² Sellars (1997).
this Sellarsian point or, indeed, beyond any account which neglects that ethical basis of knowledge.

To be sure, Hegel’s American example does lend itself to Brandom’s account. Consider the concept ‘America’ on the model of his analysis of ‘red’. One may immediately see America, and assert that he does. But a trained parrot could perhaps perform this task if he were shown features of the American coast and taught to reliably respond to them. If a rational subject knows that America exists, then, he must understand what could be inferred from this proposition, e.g., that he sees a continent which is separate from another continent, Europe, hence that the seeing of which necessitates a journey from Europe (if one were previously out there). Should one also know, in addition, that Christopher Columbus has discovered the continent one sees? Not necessarily. However, it is part of Brandom’s account of mediated knowledge that the exact mediations involved in it may be vague. Our knowledge is mediated in the sense that it presupposes a command of background inferential connections between the concepts we apply in our knowledge-claims and a variety of other concepts. What exactly these connections are, and how elaborate our command of them must be, may or even must remain unclear.

Yet, while the America example accommodates Brandom’s account, it seems that Hegel had something quite different in mind. To begin with, some of the mediations he cites—e.g., Columbus having discovered America or the fact that the specific ship on which Hegel sailed (in his hypothetical example) had been built—

143 Aside from the colonial undertones of this claim, which were most probably lost to Hegel. Today we could wonder whether a knowledge-claim that America exists implies knowing that the statement “Columbus discovered America” is controversial.
seem less apt for Brandom’s semantic account (even if not at odds with it). Hegel’s mediations do not concern only the conditions of intelligibility of the knowledge-claim but, more broadly, its conditions of actuality. If not for the discovery of America and the building of the ship, the knowledge-claim that America exists—pronounced by this specific subject—could simply not occur. In this example, knowing is construed as an action of sorts whose occurrence is conditioned on a manifold of actions taken by other subjects. Furthermore, these actions are not coincidental; they rather exhibit a lawful and purposeful pattern, something like a coordinated activity familiar from social institutions. Later I suggest that Hegel understands civil society—as the so-called system of needs—on this model. For now I just want to motivate my claim that these features of Hegel’s example call for a social philosophical analysis.

However, the more substantial reason to opt for a different account than Brandom’s resides in the context of Hegel’s example, namely, his critique of Jacobi’s rejection of rational knowledge. For Jacobi, Hegel says, rationally knowing an item X consists in knowing the conditions or grounds of X. However, since the chain of conditions must end in an unconditioned condition, namely, God, rational knowledge is impossible. For, we cannot rationally know—know the conditions—of what is unconditioned. Rather, we can only have faith in the unconditioned, that is, know it immediately. Elsewhere Hegel likens such immediate knowledge to the conviction that X (e.g., that God exists), in contrast to knowledge about what X is, or how and why it is (E3, 445Z).

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Jacobi extends this model—faith or immediate knowing—to knowledge of any item whatsoever. If rational knowledge—knowledge of conditions—must be ultimately based on a-rational faith—knowledge without conditions—it makes the knowledge of all prior conditions a-rational as well. For, knowledge in terms of conditions is supposed to reveal the known phenomenon as necessary, as one which must obtain given its conditions, but if this chain of conditions ends in a condition that we do not comprehend—since we do not know its conditions—this predicament injects arbitrariness into the whole structure of conditions, thereby stripping the presumably rational knowledge of its rationality, namely, of its pretense to necessity.

It is remarkable, however, that Jacobi’s conclusion from the impossibility of rational knowledge is the affirmation of immediate knowledge. The conclusion could just as well be a thoroughly skeptical one. One could simply avoid claiming knowledge altogether, rather than claiming that our knowledge is (merely) immediate. In Chapter III, I have argued that for Hegel, this was the conclusion of the ancient skeptics, and of Agrippa in particular. Why is it the case, then, that Jacobi opts for a dogmatic conclusion, one that upholds knowledge despite the lack of rational grounds?

**Immediacy and Individual Authority**

Generalizing Jacobi’s point, Hegel argues that it reflects a widespread modern outlook. “Immediate knowledge is individual knowledge,” he says, “it belongs to each individual, the individual as such,” adding that this is “the most universal
standpoint of our time” and that “in this principle, all externality or authority is therefore superseded, for this is the principle [...] of the freedom of spirit” (LHP 254). Given this general claim, I’m not interested in addressing the question above—as to why Jacobi opted for a dogmatic conclusion—by way of interpreting Jacobi’s philosophical work. My question, rather, is the following. What is it about the modern age that makes a representative philosopher like Jacobi (by Hegel’s lights) adopt a dogmatic rather than a thoroughly skeptical answer? I shall argue that Jacobi’s dogmatism expresses a modern commitment to individual authority, which is bound, in turn, with a naturalistic worldview.

In the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel elaborates a specifically modern connection between individual authority and a claim to “immediate knowledge”. In a well-known passage, he says that the modern individual enjoys “absolute independence, which he is conscious of possessing in every phase of his knowledge.” The individual, he continues, is “absolute being” (PhG ¶26). The immediate context is Hegel’s claim that philosophy must do more than just assert the (philosophical) truth. This truth, he says, appears to the modern individual as contradicting her most ingrained intuitions, striking her as an “inverted posture.” Rather, philosophy must offer the individual a Bildung, a pedagogical experience that rationally transforms her intuitions. Yet, while the point of this passage concerns philosophy’s duty (and frequent failure) to offer rational justification for its claims, we can infer from Hegel’s depiction of the individual that a similar critique applies to the latter as well. The individual feels no need to vindicate her intuitions; they strike her as obvious. If mediated knowledge means mediation by justification—pointing to the
ground of our claims—then we may say that, for the modern individual, knowledge is immediate, namely, not requiring justification.

This construal of Hegel’s point is still very obscure, leaving us with at least two questions. First, what is the connection between independence (the term Hegel uses) and individual authority (the term I used)? Second, and more importantly, the passage I quote hardly makes sense of the idea that a commitment to immediacy is specifically modern. On the one hand, it is not new that subjects make a wide range of knowledge-claims that they neither bother nor expected to justify. Subjects—modern or pre-modern—take themselves to be authoritative enough with respect to such claims as “America exists” or “now is night”. The latter knowledge-claim is, of course, one of Hegel’s examples in Sense Certainty, the first chapter of the *Phenomenology*, where Hegel describes a structure of experience that applies to very many (if not all) historical or cultural contexts. On the other hand, it seems far-fetched and simplistic, not to say outright false, to argue that modern subjects do not engage in justification. While this may be true with respect to claims like “here is a tree” (and, again, in this case it is hardly a modern phenomenon), it is not true with respect to moral or political claims or certain scientific or naively-scientific claims (i.e., knowledge-claims that even non-scientists would regularly make, such as “man has evolved from the ape”). What, then, is new or specifically modern about the connection between immediacy and individual authority?

To begin with the last question, the key is to move from talking about particular knowledge-claims to what we may call the *worldview* that informs or shapes such knowledge-claims, including the ways in which they are to be
vindicated. In a passage this dissertation has often cited, Hegel articulates this specifically modern worldview:

Consciousness, which in its very first reality is sense-certainty and mere ‘meaning’, returns here [in the Enlightenment] to this from the whole course of its experience and is again knowledge of what is purely negative of itself, or of things of sense, i.e., of things which immediately and indifferently confront its being-for-self. Here, however, it is not an immediate, natural consciousness; on the contrary, it has become such for itself. This sense-certainty is no longer mere ‘meaning’, but rather absolute truth [...] the positive truth that every consciousness is absolutely certain that it is, and that there are other real things outside of it, and that in its natural being it, like these things, is in and for itself or absolute (PhG §558).

This worldview, then—the “positive truth” of the Enlightenment—has a few elements. Every subject is absolutely certain that (1) she is real; (2) there are other real things outside of it; (3) she and those other things are natural entities; and (4) she is related to these things as its “negative”—“immediately” and “indifferently”. In the course of the dissertation, I have explained this “immediate” relation in contrast to a mediated (organic) unity. To recall, insofar as a subject is a member of a life-form (on the model Hegel develops in the Philosophy of Nature and in the Anthropology), then the subject’s relation to entities different from her is mediated in the sense that the relation is governed by norms which articulate her essential species-concept (e.g., a migratory bird and the declining temperatures in the end of the summer). However, insofar as a subject is not a member of a life-form, then her relation to anything different from her is immediate or non-mediated by norms, hence items different from her are not organs of the same unity but rather
something “negative”, external and other. Finally, while there may be differences among things that strike such an independent (i.e., not a member of a life-form) subject, there is a sense in which they all have the same value or validity for the subject, namely, they are all external and other. In other words, they strike the subject “indifferently” [gleichgültig].

Next, this structure is bound with a naturalistic outlook— with conceiving items the subject is conscious of, including herself, as natural entities. Thus, to conceive of content (or “things”) as simply being there, independently of the subject who is conscious of it, just is to conceive of it as nature. In the Encyclopedia, Hegel defines nature as “the self-externality of the Idea”—“external not only to Spirit but also to itself” (E3 §381Z). Moreover, if the relation between the subject and the content she is conscious of is not norm-governed (falling under a purposeful concept), then this relation is mechanistic or causal. We are to understand the relation between things and subjects on the model offered by the natural sciences: “things of sense” impinge on the subject’s consciousness, exercise power on it.

We can now see the connection between the different elements in this Enlightenment worldview. The principle of this worldview is the first element. It is because the subject of the Enlightenment conceives of herself as independent or self-standing—she has “absolute certainty that she is”—that she represents everything different from her as external, immediate and indifferent. This amounts to representing both herself and other things as “natural entities” relating to each other in mechanistic or non-purposeful ways. By representing this constellation as governed by mechanistic laws—by claiming knowledge construed in this manner—
this modern consciousness (via natural science) affirms her worldview, that is, that nature is independent of her consciousness of it.

In the previous chapter, following Paul Franks, I characterized this worldview as the conjunction of post-Jacobian foundationalism and post-Kantian naturalism. The foundationalism consists in taking content that forces itself on the subject—matters of fact or Tatsachen—as true even though it cannot be justified by appeal to a purposeful principle. The naturalism reinforces this subject-related foundationalism insofar as it accounts for the differences between Tatsachen as they strike different subjects.

Recalling this discussion we can now address both questions I asked above. What is specifically modern about immediacy is not that particular knowledge-claims are not justified but that the modern naturalistic worldview is not justified. I take Hegel to gesture at this distinction when he says, in the Preface to the Phenomenology, that “the task nowadays consists not so much in purging the individual of an immediate, sensuous mode of apprehension [...] but rather in the opposite, in freeing determinate thoughts from their fixity” (PhG ¶33). He goes on to give “the reason for this,” namely, “fixed thoughts have the ‘I’, the power of the negative, or pure actuality, as the substance and element of their existence.” In other words, the immediate or sensuous mode of apprehension has become a worldview—a system of thoughts grounded in the self-confident independence of the ‘I’, the subject. It is not only the case that subjects take themselves to know immediately—without justifying themselves—that “now is day”. This, indeed, is not special to modernity. It is also the case that this claim to immediate knowledge is now
supported by a worldview—a theory, a system of thoughts—which the subject takes to know immediately, that is, without a need for justification.

In the context of this worldview some particular claims do call for vindication. Yet, such vindications would stop short of justification in the traditional metaphysical sense, namely, an appeal to an absolute purposeful principle. The modern naturalistic worldview would serve as an ultimate bedrock of sorts that does not require a vindication. In the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel goes at great length about a way of theorizing he calls “argumentative thinking” or “the procedure of argumentation” (PhG ¶¶ 59, 60, 67), in which “the self is a Subject to which the content is related as Accident and Predicate. This Subject constitutes the basis to which the content is attached, and upon which the movement runs back and forth” (¶60). Hegel contrasts this method with speculative (or conceptualizing: *begreifend*) thinking—the one he obviously recommends—in which “the subject itself perishes” and rather traces the meaningful relations between contents which make up (what Hegel calls) “the Concept.”

I will shortly say something about the “speculative” alternative that Hegel recommends, but for now let us focus on what he rejects. To engage in argumentative thinking, I suggest, is to subscribe to the Enlightenment worldview, according to which any knowledge-claim is ultimately based on matters of fact. Individuals may disagree on any number of ideas but they all presuppose this basic outlook. Argumentative thinking, Hegel says, proceeds from ideas which are taken to

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145 *das räsonierende Denken* and *das räsonierende Verhalten*. I modified the translation since, for some reason, Miller had translated the former to “ratiocinative thinking” (I understand the desire to be closer to the German, but if this is the considertation, it should have applied to the latter phrase, too. At any rate, I think that, in both cases, “argumentative” sounds better and better captures Hegel’s intent.)
be "familiar", while the "the knowing activity goes back and forth between them, thus moving only on their surface" (¶31). Hegel contrasts familiar [bekannt] with known [erkannt]. To hold something as true because it is familiar—because it strikes one as true—is not to genuinely know or understand it. It is to cling to superficial Tatsachen instead of understanding these facts on the background of a deeper, purposeful principle.

The modern individual is committed to immediate knowledge, then, in at least two respects. First, she takes the Enlightenment worldview to be immediately known in the sense that it requires no traditional (purposeful) vindication. Second, and as part of this worldview, all knowledge is taken to be ultimately based on matters of fact that are known immediately. Whereas individuals in all times and places have taken a range of particular knowledge-claims to be immediate, they did not possess a systematic worldview supporting this idea. It is the latter which is unique to modernity.  

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146 Cf. the first two sentences in John Searle’s *The Construction of Social Reality*: “We live in exactly one world, not two or three or seventeen. As far as we currently know, the most fundamental features of the world are as described by physics, chemistry, and the other natural sciences” (Searle [1995], xi).
of it—just like the Enlightenment subject—but this is only an intuition\(^\text{147}\) of sorts which can be unsettled very easily. This indeed happens in the course of the dialectic when, upon observing changes in the world (e.g., from night to day), consciousness comes to represent things of sense as transient and illusionary, namely, as “nothing”. By contrast, for modern sense certainty this naïve intuition—what Hegel calls “certainty”—has become an “absolute truth,” what I called a worldview. What does the change from an intuition to a worldview amount to?

First, that modern sense certainty is a worldview means that modern subjects are potentially conscious of the presuppositions that tacitly inform naïve sense certainty’s experience. Above I argued that representing content as external or other to the subject reflects the subject’s independence from her life-form, much as a commitment to a mechanistic conception of nature. Modern subjects, we may say, are increasingly conscious of both these presuppositions that, in turn, buttress the (immediate) intuition which naïve sense certainty has had. I say “potentially” or “increasingly” conscious since I do not mean that every modern subject is able to make explicit these presuppositions, let alone explain how they fit together into a coherent worldview. However, such knowledge—which is a self-consciousness of this epoch—is available in philosophical and cultural media for subjects who are interested in such questions. Moreover, I would argue that even subjects who are not so interested benefit from the fact that some subjects are.

Consider, by analogy, the relation between (1) a “naïve” sense of belonging to a collective, perhaps because the individual speaks the same language as others; (2)

\(^{147}\) My use of “intuition” in this instance is not in any philosophical or technical sense but as we ordinarily refer to everyday, unexamined beliefs which could nonetheless inform and shape our attitudes.
the explicit consciousness of belonging to a *nation*; and (3) knowledge that elaborates what belonging to this specific nation is based on and entails, e.g., historical achievements, an alleged vocation or “manifest destiny”, shared language, myth and literature, and so on. Hegel’s distinction between naïve and modern sense certainty maps into the distinction between (1), on the one hand, and (2) and (3), on the other. Modern sense certainty is conscious of its own identity as sense certainty, as it were, and this implies knowledge or consciousness of its own presuppositions. Yet, it is not to say that this knowledge is the possession of all individuals. After all, also knowledge related to national identity is not universally possessed. The latter can be found in libraries, universities, occasionally in the newspapers or on television, and its existence affects the strength of an individual’s national identity even if she has never bothered to reflect on her identity and to help herself to this knowledge. Similarly, I suggest, the knowledge elaborating sense certainty’s presuppositions and implications, is available and universally possessed in modernity. This knowledge reinforces the naturalistic convictions of many individuals who have never stopped to think about them.

The “national” analogy points to a second respect in which modern certainty is a worldview rather than mere intuition or “certainty”. Thus, modern sense certainty is a worldview not only in the sense that modern subjects are conscious of it but also in the sense that they *endorse* it. For them (or us), nature *is* real and self-standing. Unlike naïve sense certainty, they have the tools—scientific tools—to explain modifications and changes in nature without falling to the nihilistic conclusion in the end of (the Phenomenology’s) Sense Certainty. This, I argued,
informs what Franks calls post-Kantian naturalism, namely, deploying the scientific method to account for differentiation in our experience while sticking to the basic commitment to representing reality as external to and independent of the subject.

The endorsement of sense certainty has theoretical much as political or moral manifestations. Theoretically, it entails that modern subjects are dedicated to gathering and systematizing knowledge of nature in order to affirm their conception thereof as independent. Politically and morally, individuals take knowledge of nature to be the basis for shaping and reshaping the moral and political world. In the Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Hegel celebrates the modern rise of “nature” as an object of philosophical and scientific enquiry. This is not to say, obviously, that earlier epochs did not possess knowledge of nature; yet, they did not take this knowledge to be of such importance that it should be gathered and systematized, and, moreover, affect the way human beings design their economic, moral and political life. In his discussion of Locke (LHP 178), Hegel contrasts this modern endorsement of nature with medieval scholasticism, where philosophical discourse proceeds not from nature but from “abstract principles”, often grounded in the alleged character of God. In the previous chapter, I quoted Hegel’s lecture on Francis Bacon, for whom “value is accorded to what is present at hand. He repudiated the scholastic method of reasoning or philosophizing from quite remote abstractions—the blindness to what is before one’s eyes” (LHP 111). Moreover, Hegel identifies this mode of philosophizing with the aforementioned notion of “argumentative thinking”. “The philosophizing of argumentative thinking, is what has now become universal, and through it the entire revolution in our mental attitude has come about” (LHP
178). On the face of it, these claims only apply to the so-called empiricist branch of modern philosophy. Yet, Hegel stresses that the familiar distinction between empiricism and rationalism is less important than it is usually taken to be. “[I]t is but an antithesis of the second rank, because even the kind of philosophizing that wishes to grant validity only to immanent thought, even rationalism, does not develop its determinations [but] takes its material from inner or outer experience” (LHP 134). Finally, Hegel maintains that this endorsement of nature (and experience of nature) is ultimately geared towards modifying the social and political world. “Through his wholly empirical compilation of the behavior of peoples towards one another, coupled with empirical argumentation, he had the effect of making people conscious of general principles, principles of the understanding and of reason” (LHP 179). This claim, about Hugo Grotius, later receives a partial endorsement by Hegel, who says—now in relation to Thomas Hobbes—that “right and the general organization of the state ought to be established on the foundation of human nature, of human characteristics and inclinations” (LHP 182).

The contrast between modern and medieval philosophy brings to mind Hegel’s characterization of knowledge in the section of the Phenomenology titled Unhappy Consciousness. The lay subject described in this section—often historically located in the Middle Ages—would take ultimate reality to be over and beyond the natural world, hence any access to it must be mediated by the Church or other religious authorities. This is not to say, obviously, that the medieval subject had no immediate knowledge of nature; rather, this subject has taken this knowledge to be
of inconsequential, changeable appearances, rather than knowledge which should be systematically accumulated and shape her personal and collective life.\textsuperscript{148}

However, my argument in this chapter (and, more broadly, in the dissertation) is not only that the modern naturalistic worldview gives rise to moral and political changes, but that it is \textit{grounded} in moral or, better, ethical conditions. Before I move to my discussion of civil society—which will make this case at length—I would like to anticipate it by addressing a question left unanswered, or at least not explicitly answered. What is the relationship between commitment to immediate knowledge and individual authority?

I have shown, I hope, that the Enlightenment worldview ultimately rests on the subject’s sense of independence or “absolute independence,” namely, her \textit{not} being a member of a life-form. This worldview expresses the individual’s “absolute independence” precisely because it rejects her dependency (for the sake of possessing knowledge) on the allegedly absolute or unconditioned norms offered by her immediate form of life. By taking \textit{herself} to be absolute, the individual rejects the notion that the absolute is external to her. While I have been employing—following Hegel—the term independence, it is clear that this independence concerns the individual's \textit{authority}. For, insofar as the individual is (and conceived herself as) a natural entity, then she must acknowledge the many ways in which she \textit{is} dependent on other natural entities. Her independence could only denote her \textit{normative} independence, that is, her authority to determine herself without recourse to any

\footnote{This gloss is based on PhG \textit{\textsuperscript{¶}¶224-229}. See also Hyppolite (1979), 194-202.}
She herself is the sole source of the authority to make knowledge-claims insofar as she need not appeal to a higher authority, namely, an absolute norm.

**Hegel’s Ethical Critique of Immediate Knowledge**

Hegel is critical of the modern axis between individual authority, scientific naturalism, and immediate knowledge. In the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, he argues that immediate knowledge does not amount to genuine knowledge; it is rather “uncomprehended” or, more precisely, makes “being” [Dasein] uncomprehended (PhG ¶30).

Hegel’s term for uncomprehended is *unbegriffen*, non-conceptualized, so we can approach his point, I suggest, in light of the Brandomian account of concepts I discussed above (and elsewhere in the dissertation).

To (genuinely) know that something is red is to *understand* that it is red, and this, in turn, implies that the subject has a tacit (or partly explicit) command of the rational inferential connections between the concept ‘red’ and other concepts. Obviously, not all subjects are aware of the tacit knowledge that mediates their knowledge of a particular item, e.g., a red table. Moreover, some of them (say, if they are philosophers or psychologists) may even explicitly *reject* the view that a background command is necessary for—or mediates—knowing particular items. In Hegelian parlance, we are to say, then, that such subjects take their knowledge of items to be “immediate”; their knowledge amounts to mere familiarity rather than comprehension or genuine knowledge.

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149 I modified the translation. Miller had translated *Dasein* to “existence” but this term conceals the idea that existence, in this instance, is represented as non-conceptual.
We can now apply this Brandomian point to Hegel’s claim that, within the modern worldview, being is “uncomprehended”—though a crucial modification is in order. While for Brandom comprehension implies a tacit command of the inferential, rational connections between a given concept and other, context-relevant, concepts, for Hegel it seems to imply much more than that: a command of what he calls “the Concept,” namely, the system of all concepts and the inferential connections between them as they have evolved over history. On the face of it, this claim is highly implausible. In all ordinary contexts, comprehension seems to require much less, inviting Brandom’s much less ambitious claim. I will shortly address this alleged implausibility—suggesting that it reflects a different notion of comprehension—but let us see, first, how Brandom’s account elucidates Hegel’s claim that the modern worldview does not afford comprehension.

To recall, I have said above that the modern worldview is “immediate” in two interrelated respects. First, its premise—that the subject and object are independent of each other, real and natural—is taken to be true though it cannot be justified in relation to an absolute principle, that is, this premise is treated as a Tatsache, a brute matter of fact. Second, and as part of this worldview, it is assumed that all knowledge is ultimately based on Tatsachen. For Hegel, the ultimate, absolute principle—that which the modern worldview ignores—is the Concept. The modern worldview does not afford comprehension since it denies the notion that all knowledge-claims are to be understood by locating them in the comprehensive inferential system that is the Concept. This applies both to particular knowledge-

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150 I am paraphrasing Brandom’s definition in (2002), 211. For the claim that for Hegel, the minimal “unit of conceptual content” is the Concept or the conceptual system as a whole, see Brandom (2001), 35.
claims—e.g., that the table is red—and to a whole worldview like scientific naturalism. Hegel thinks that an adequate comprehension of a worldview requires understanding it as the result of a historical development and in relation to worldviews that compete with it. Understanding naturalism, for example, consists in knowing something about ideas it rejects in the context of the Enlightenment, e.g., what Hegel calls “superstition” [Aberglauben], and how the latter nonetheless shapes naturalism. For the modern individual, however, scientific naturalism is a “positive truth”, that is, she takes herself to know it immediately, rather than mediated by a grasp of its historical and cultural context (so that with respect to which it is negative and not only “positive”), including the ways in which competing views have informed it.151

To make it clearer, consider Hegel’s treatment of the concept of contract in the Philosophy of Right. One could argue that people make contracts in order to pursue personal profit. Pressed about the grounds for this claim, she may retort that human beings naturally pursue personal profit; this is part of human nature, as it were. For Hegel, I take it, this would be an example of what he calls argumentative thinking. A speculative, Hegelian approach would counter this claim on two levels. On the level of the specific concept, ‘contract’, it would show how this concept relates to a range of other concepts, e.g., possession, personal freedom, wrong, moral freedom, marriage, slavery, and so on. On the level of a worldview, speculative thinking would work to reveal the historical and cultural context in which the

151 Think, for example, about the way some atheists, in their espousal of scientific naturalism, dismiss religious worldviews. Contrary to this attitude, our understanding of modern naturalism (and atheism) can be enriched by recognizing its debt to the rise of Protestantism, on the one hand, and of Western popularizations of Buddhism, on the other.
naturalness of something (in this case—of an alleged interest in profit) becomes an ultimate ground for explaining phenomena—as if once you appeal to “human nature”, there is nothing more to say or that should be said.

Now, Hegel’s (very) high bar for genuine comprehension seems highly implausible if we consider ordinary contexts. Indeed, using or making a contract hardly necessitates a speculative understanding thereof, and the same applies to making knowledge-claims in which the concept ‘red’ figures. In order to lend credibility to Hegel’s point, we are to appreciate what I would like to call the ethical—rather than merely theoretical—point of his plea for comprehension.

Hegel’s plea for comprehension has an ethical point in at least two respects. First, insofar as comprehending a worldview—or a particular knowledge-claim—consists in locating it within the Concept, then it consist in acknowledging the ways in which our individual knowledge is dependent on our historical and cultural context. In other words, it amounts to acknowledging the fact that the modern individual is not independent in the sense that she takes herself to be. Second, comprehension is not, at least not in the first place, a stable theoretical state or a condition, but an attitude. Granted, it is impossible to have a comprehension of any concept—even a worldview—if what comprehension means is locating a concept within the (all-encompassing) Concept. Yet, one can have comprehension, if what it means is that one is dedicated to the never-ending task of this locating. It is dedication to this task, I suggest, which is what Hegel calls speculative thinking. It is a cognitive commitment or an attitude, rather than a cognitive state. Such a commitment is conditioned on the first respect in which the point of comprehension
is ethical. Only if I acknowledge the dependency of individual knowledge on one’s historical and cultural context, can I commit myself to comprehension as an ongoing task.

Now, this construal of Hegel’s plea for comprehension can serve to drive home my argument in this section. It is precisely because the modern individual wants to assert her independent authority that she is resistant to Hegel’s plea for comprehension. Submitting to Hegel’s plea would compromise her normative independence.152 The next section suggests that an analogous critique of immediacy applies to modern immediate (that is, personal) freedom. And yet, focusing on the practical case will also show us why the critique of immediacy should hardly dismiss its object, let alone call for its elimination.

PART 2: From Immediate Knowledge to Immediate Freedom

In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel discusses two types of freedom that are especially dear to modern individuals, personal and moral freedom. To be morally free is to act on reasons, that is, on the basis of considerations that others could accept upon reflection. The modern subject takes herself to be responsible for her actions and is often expected to demonstrate this responsibility by participating in (what Wilfrid Sellars has called) “the game of giving and asking for reasons.” She is under a

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152 In fact, I would argue that even Brandom’s much more minimalist account of comprehension has ethical implications. Having a command of a concept’s rational inferential connections means that the subject is (1) *committed* to following these connections and (2) acknowledges that she is a member of a life form, only in the context of which the concepts she employs and the knowledge-claims she makes have meaning. However, Brandom does not address these ethical aspects, and this is one reason, I believe, why he misses the ethical *condition* of denying his account, namely, a commitment to individual normative independence.
standing obligation to justify her actions and to make sure that they are consistent with her other intentions and beliefs. Furthermore, such justifications are to ultimately appeal to the good or welfare of the community as a whole.\footnote{This gloss is based on Hegel’s discussion of the Reformation as the origin of moral or rational freedom. See LHP, especially 101-102.}

In this dissertation, however, I have focused on the modern prominence of personal freedom. For Hegel, As I read him, modern Ethical Life must leave the individual a sphere in which she can determine herself \textit{without} being required to appeal to considerations that others may accept. The paradigmatic domain of this freedom is private property but it extends to choices such as picking a marriage partner or pursuing a career. While I may be asked for my reasons for spending money on a vacation abroad, or for proposing a John Doe to marry me, my right to do so is not affected by the quality of the reasons I offer, not even if I altogether refuse to give any reasons. It seems clear that, at least when strangers are concerned, we are to respect their choices regardless of our appreciation for their reasons. This “right” that we thereby respect is the individual’s status as a person, as enjoying personal freedom. In exercising freedom without justifying our exercises—without appealing to universal, shared norms—we exercise freedom \textit{immediately}. Personal freedom is immediate freedom, freedom unmediated by the free subject’s commitment to norms. What is the basis for this right?

One way to approach this question from the perspective of liberal theory. In a liberal order, an individual should have a right to choose a course of action regardless of her reasons—as long as she does not violate the rights of others. There are good arguments in favor of this right, which proceed from special features of the
modern liberal state, e.g., value pluralism. If different citizens hold different values as the ultimate basis for their determinations—actions of beliefs—so the state should better remain neutral and withdraw altogether from the business of assessing justifications. I believe, however, that for Hegel the grounds for immediate freedom are deeper than that; they rather lie in the nature of freedom (or the will) as such. In Abstract Right, the first chapter of the *Philosophy of Right*, he argues that freedom must be realized by way of having absolute authority over a sphere of will-less entities, namely, one's material property (PhR §§41-42). With respect to this sphere, the will of other people has no bearing. To be sure, I am barred from using my property in a way that violates the equal property rights of others, but this only reinforces the following idea: a free subject must have a sphere—albeit limited—in which her authority is absolute in the sense that she is not answerable to other subjects and to norms they otherwise share.

To make this idea more intuitive, consider instances in which we exercise immediate freedom, even instances which do not belong in the economic sphere or in our dealings with strangers. Just like we would not want to justify many of our actions to the authorities or to other citizens, there are at least some actions that we would not want to justify to our friends and family members. This applies, for example, to everyday actions like taking a walk, spending time with a particular friend, or going to the cinema. In fact, we would not even want to justify them to ourselves. Considerations like value pluralism do not apply to such situations—within the family or free associations—in which there is often a shared evaluative outlook.
I would like to suggest that this individual need—for what I would like to call authority without justification—is grounded in a principle that modern individuals hold dearly—the principle I discussed above—namely, their independent authority. To be sure, I do not deny that rational authority is essentially coupled with responsibility. I am the authority behind my actions insofar as I am able to justify them by reasons. However, authority is not coupled with actually offering reasons, only with having the ability to offer them. In other words, it is coupled with the possibility of justification rather than with the actuality thereof. I believe this modal difference makes a great difference in our ordinary experience. Thus, if I am constantly expected to justify my actions—as some teenagers, say, are called for by their parents—this may reflect the others’ lack of respect for my authority. And in the same vein, if I constantly stop to reflect on my own reasons, it testifies to my own lacking self-respect.

I take Hegel to share this point. It is expressed, for example, in his account of habits in the Encyclopedic Anthropology. One sense in which habit is “immediate” is that the habituated individual exercises her habit without a need to consciously attend to it; she can run through her habits thoughtlessly, as it were. This amounts to a greater degree of freedom since it allows the individual to engage in more complex and enduring activities in the same stretch of time and given the same resources. Hegel offers the habit of writing as an example: “When we are learning to write we must direct our attention on every individual detail, or a vast number of mediations. By contrast, once the activity of writing has become a habit with us, then our self has
completely mastered [*hat bemeistert*] all relevant individual details [...] our consciousness is [thereby] absent from [the habit]” (E3 §410Z).

While Hegel does not discuss reasons or justification in this context, we can infer from the fact that the habituated individual does not consciously attend to her habits, that nor does she bother to justify them—either to others or to herself. To be sure—and though Hegel himself is not clear about it—an individual who *never* stops to reflect on her habits, including on the extent to which they are justified, is not free but is rather akin to a spiritual *machine* of sorts.\(^{154}\) Reflection, then, is a possibility that must be occasionally actualized; yet if it is *always* actualized then we lose the sense in which the habituated individual is, indeed, habituated, hence maintaining authority over her body and her bodily activities.

However, if habits are an instance of immediate freedom—and they are—it invites a question asked above with respect to immediate knowledge. What is peculiarly modern about it? After all, habituated individuals are (obviously) not a modern invention. If anything, habits in modernity are more prone to critical reflection than in previous epochs.

And my response to this objection is the same. With regard to immediate knowledge, I made a distinction between particular knowledge-claims and the worldview that supports them—the worldview against which they are *endorsed* as

\(^{154}\) In the Anthropology (E3 §410Z), Hegel indeed describes habit as having *die Gestalt eines Mechanischen*. Novakovic (2012), Ch. 1, elaborates an interpretation of Hegel’s habit that leaves room for critical reflection (her focus, though, is on habit in the *Philosophy of Right*). I remain neutral on this question. My reference to Hegel’s habit is only meant to show that he recognizes the connection between authority (or “mastery” as he calls in the writing example) and immediacy, including in the sense of avoiding procedures of justification. As far as my point is concerned, it matters less if one, in exercising (immediate) authority, must *always* avoid reflection (and justification), or only most of the time.
valuable knowledge, which is worth gathering and systematizing and that should shape moral and political life. With regard to immediate freedom, the distinction is between habits and the worldview against which habits are endorsed as exercises of freedom, exercises that should be learned and understood and that should shape the moral and political world. This worldview, I argue, is the conception of freedom that Hegel lays out in Abstract Right, and it is the same worldview—albeit applied to the practical sphere—that supports immediate knowledge, namely, modern sense certainty or Enlightenment naturalism.

Like modern sense certainty—which, to recall, is absolutely certain that subject and object are real, natural and independent of each other—so are persons as Hegel depicts them in Abstract Right. “In the personality,” he says, “there is knowledge of the self as object [Gegenstand]” (PhR §35R). Later he adds that “the person has a natural existence [natürliche Existenz] partly within himself and partly as something to which he relates as to an external world” (§43). Lastly, those external things are “immediately different” from the person (§41). In other words, the person knows that both he and the things he relates to are real and natural. The relationship between the person and things is immediate in the sense that they are not organs of the same unity; for otherwise the relationship would be mediated by the norms that articulate the purposive concept of this unity. In terms developed in Chapter III, the person conceives of things as utterly external to him. I am suggesting, then, that personal freedom is the practical aspect of modern sense certainty, namely, the naturalistic worldview of the Enlightenment.
Once we have the identity between (modern) sense certainty and personal freedom in view, we can articulate the connection between modernity and immediate freedom in sufficient complexity—by analogy to the case I made above with regard to immediate knowledge.

The modern person is committed to immediate freedom in two interrelated respects. First, she takes the premise of modern personal freedom/sense certainty—that person and things are real, natural and independent of each other—to be true, though it cannot be justified by an appeal to an absolute purposeful principle. Second, and as part of this worldview, she subscribes to the view that any course of action is ultimately based on an immediate act of will, namely, an act of will which is taken to be of the subject, her free determination, though it cannot be justified.

I take the first respect in which the modern person is committed to immediate freedom to be more straightforward. Indeed, it amounts to the claim—already made above with respect to immediate knowledge—that for the modern person, modern naturalism is obvious and need not be justified. The second respect is probably less clear. It might help to make explicit the analogy with immediate knowledge. My claim in Part 1 was that, for the modern person, all knowledge was ultimately based on Tatsachen which were taken to be true though they couldn’t be justified. This claim served to preclude the implausible idea that the modern individual would never engage in vindicating his knowledge-claims. I suggested, rather, that the modern individual would vindicate but not justify—in the sense that he would ultimately base his knowledge-claims on alleged matters of fact rather
than on absolute principles. Hegel calls this attitude “argumentative thinking”. It would be similarly implausible to argue that modern individuals never vindicate their actions. The suggestion, rather, is that such vindication would ultimately appeal to immediate acts of will of the form “this is what I want,” or “I want this”, or “I do not want this.” Such acts of will are immediate in the sense that they are not mediated by further vindication, yet they still count as valid, namely, as sufficient basis for counting the action as realizing the agent’s freedom.

I suspect that this claim might strike the reader as trivial, so I would like to offer two sorts of counterexamples against counting such immediate acts of will as manifestations of freedom. Statements of the form “I want this” may express not a valid realization of freedom but rather a passing whim. In some contexts—say, in the family—we would normally not take it as sufficient basis but require further justification, say, an account of how this wanting coheres with the interests of other members of the family, or even with other desires that the agent has expressed. If the subject is our child, for example, it is even our responsibility to do so. Another sort of cases in which “I want this” would not could as valid can be found in Hegel’s depiction of medieval subjectivity (or lack thereof). In his discussion of medieval Catholicism, Hegel attributes to Medieval subjects utter indifference with respect to their external deeds. They just follow the norms, as it were, and what they feel about it—whether they want it or not, their “inwardness” [Innerlichkeit]—is of no consequence (LHP 47). They do what they do not because they want it but because there is an external authority that so demands, e.g., the Church. In the type of case familiar from the familial sphere, immediate acts of will (expressed by “I want this”)
could be a moment in a deliberation but not the end of it; in the medieval cases, such acts of will are not even relevant for determining what the subject does/ought to do.

Against this backdrop, we can appreciate the novelty and specificity of the modern commitment to immediate freedom. Within modern civil society, such immediate acts of will are both relevant for determining the subject’s actions, and—more importantly—count as the ultimate ground of such determination.

Once we see that it is a worldview that modern individuals subscribe to, we can appreciate the difference between performing particular actions (including habits) immediately—without engaging in justification—and the worldview that reveals and endorses such actions as free. Thus, it is (obviously) not unique to modernity that individuals do not bother to justify a wide range of actions. But, I argue, it is unique that individuals are conscious of—and endorse—the presuppositions that support this ordinary conduct. To drive this point home, consider again Hegel’s depiction of the medieval subject. Granted, this subject is habituated. There is a range of actions that he thoughtlessly or immediately assumes to be his—and others recognize as his—and he thereby exercises authority over his body. However, this subject does not know himself as having this authority; he is not conscious of himself as exercising freedom in his everyday activities. If he is asked why he is active in one way or another, he might appeal to the edicts of the religious or political authority or just remain silent. By contrast, Hegel depicts modern persons as having “reached the point of knowing themselves to be free” (LHP 70), and—as part of it—as regarding their ordinary (habituated, immediate) activities as realizations of this freedom.
What is it about the worldview of scientific naturalism that supports this new attitude towards one's immediate actions? If, indeed, we are free *qua* natural beings, and related to the objects of our freedom in a natural, mechanistic context—as Hegel claims is the case for persons in Abstract Right—then the notion of rational justification no longer applies. It applies, to recall, only insofar as subjects conceive of themselves as members of a (rational) form of life. In these modern conditions, the ultimate ground for one's course of action can only be one's immediate act of will, the fact that one simply wants so and so. While knowing is represented—within the worldview of scientific naturalism—as a causal transaction in which the world affects or modifies passive subjects—then free actions are represented as the opposite, namely, as causal transactions in which active subjects affect or modify the world.

To sum up, I have argued that both in the practical and theoretical spheres, modernity is marked by an endorsement of immediacy. In both spheres, this endorsement is coupled with a commitment to individual authority, a commitment which negates the notion that the individual is a member of a form of life (and, as such, must ground his determinations—knowledge-claims or actions—in norms provided by this life-form). I will now argue that this commitment to individual authority has necessary ethical functions within modern *Sittlichkeit*.

**PART 3: The Ethical Necessity of Immediacy**

I have argued that immediate freedom—exercising authority without justification—is especially dear to modern individuals. However, it is also part of Hegel's account
that immediate freedom—including immediate acts of will—is thoroughly mediated. Considered most broadly, immediate freedom is mediated in the sense that it is possible and determinate only given a socio-historical whole of which the individual is a member; this whole is *Sittlichkeit*. As Hegel has it in the *Philosophy of Right*, “the sphere of right [...] cannot exist independently; they must have the ethical as their support and foundation [...] Right exists only as a branch of a whole, or as a climbing plant attached to a tree which has firm roots in and for itself.” (PhR §141Z).

Explicating the numerous ways in which Ethical Life mediates personal freedom would take us far beyond the limits of this chapter. I will rather focus on a specific sphere within modern Ethical Life, that in which personal freedom is most dominant—civil society.

I would like to approach this argument by examining two sorts of action that are clear manifestations of personal freedom in modernity. As I said above, personal freedom is immediate in the sense that the person’s actions are ultimately based on an immediate—non-justifiable—act of will. This is the case with respect to the decision to marry and decisions that have to do with one’s career or professional trajectory. Let us begin with the former.

Admittedly, personal freedom does not apply to marriage-life itself (and I elaborate on this point in my discussion of marital love below). Hegel emphasizes that marriage is “essentially an ethical relationship,” hence not a “merely civil contract” (PhR §161). Yet, if it is not *merely* a civil contract, it suggests that it is a contract in *some* sense—namely, in the sense that entering into the relationship is similar to entering into a contract. It is the mere choice of the parties, rather their
reasons for this act, which matters. As Hegel puts it, “the objective origin [of marriage] is the free consent of the persons concerned (PhR §162) or “the precise nature of marriage is to begin from the point of view of contract—i.e. that of individual personality as a self-sufficient unit—in order to supersede it” (PhR §163R). Importantly, this feature of marriage—that it begins from the point of view of personal freedom—is unique to modernity. “In modern times [...] the subjective origin [of marriage], the state of being-in-love, is regarded as the only important factor” (PhR §162Z). The contrast is with eras and cultures in which “considerations of wealth, connections, or political ends may determine the outcome.” Hegel suggests, then, that in other times the decision to marry to a specific person did call for a rationale, based on reasons that others could accept. By contrast, in modernity the sole ground for a marriage decision is one’s “subjective” or particular feeling.

A similar shift has taken place, according to Hegel, in decisions concerning one’s professional vocation. In modernity, he says, “the ultimate and essential determinant is subjective option and the particular arbitrary will, which are accorded their right, their merit, and their honor in this sphere” (PhR §206). It is the individual, then, who decides to which estate—domain of the economy—she is to join. This, in contrast to the eastern and ancient worlds, where “the principle of subjective particularity was at the same time denied its rights, as when, for example, the allocation of individuals to specific estates was left to the rulers, as in Plato’s Republic, or to birth alone, as in the Indian caste-system” (§206R).

Modern Ethical Life, then, offers a sphere of activity in which individuals can take themselves to be—and be recognized as—the final ground of their actions, in
the sense that their status as free actions, as actions of this person, is not dependent on considerations that others are expected to accept. This is a sphere of immediate freedom, a sphere in which freedom is not mediated by norms. I will shortly discuss a few respects in which the freedom of choice—as manifested in marriage and career decisions—is mediated. Yet, let me first make a crucial point.

While it is the case that, in truth, choice in this domain is thoroughly mediated, it is still *ethically functional* that individuals would *take* their freedom of choice to be immediate. In other words, it is beneficial that they would *ignore* some of the respects in which their personal freedom is mediated. To put it differently, it is rational—conducive for the stability and endurance of the social whole—that individuals would take their determinations to be the effect of their particular, arbitrary will. There are at least three ways in which it is ethically functional that persons would take their freedom to be immediate.

To begin, insofar as persons have such a conception of their freedom it gives an outlet to something Hegel takes to be essential to human nature, namely, the need to assert one’s difference or particularity. If there is no such outlet, this aspect of human nature may cause either social or inner “corruption” [*Verdorbenheit*]. “Thus subjective particularity,” Hegel says,

excluded from the organization of the whole and not reconciled within it, consequently shows itself—since it likewise appears as an essential moment—as a hostile element, as a corruption of the social order. It either overthrows the latter as in the Greek states and in the Roman Republic; or if the social order survives as a ruling power—or perhaps as a religious authority—it appears as inner corruption and complete
degeneration, as was to some extent the case in Sparta and as is now entirely the case in India. (PhR §206R)

Therefore—and by contrast—if the social order does allow a legitimate and constructive outlet for the subjective need for particularity—as it does in modern civil society—then it is conducive for personal and social integrity.

The second respect in which personal freedom is ethically functional is that it motivates individuals to initiate economic and other creative enterprises. “[S]ubjective particularity,” Hegel says, “becomes the sole animating principle of civil society and of the development of intellectual activity, merit and honor” (Ibid.). It is because economic and other achievements are ascribed to individuals, that they have the incentive to pursue such achievements, hence to contribute to the accumulation of wealth and to cultural progress.

The third respect in which immediate freedom is ethically functional concerns the stability of the political arrangements that support freedom. Insofar as citizens enjoy personal freedom, they tend to support a regime that secures basic rights, that is, the enduring possibility to realize their personal freedom. This idea comes up in Hegel’s discussion of the industrial and commercial domains of the economy. He says that “[i]n the estate of trade and industry, the individual has to rely on himself, and this feeling of selfhood is intimately connected with the demand for condition in which right is upheld” (PhR §204). To be sure, it is not immediately clear why this aspect of personal freedom is ethically functional. It seems self-relational. If personal freedom preserves itself, how does this aspect of personal freedom serve society as a whole? To answer this question, consider the possibility
that basic rights were secured not by their owners—persons of civil society—but by an enlighten tyrant. Such a constellation would be unstable, subject to the arbitrary whims and changing opinions of the tyrant, who would end up also undermining himself or his heirs. By contrast, if it is the beneficiaries of personal freedom who defend and promote their rights—or at least involved in this effort—then this arrangement should prove stable, at least according to Hegel. In other words, the capacity for self-preservation is not trivial. It serves society as a whole, then, that there is a social organ—persons in civil society who take themselves to have immediate freedom—that is sturdy enough to maintain its existence and power over time, so that it can keep fulfilling the ethical functions mentioned above. While persons of civil society thereby exhibit a self-relation—insofar as this self-relation facilities a constructive relation to the rest of society, it counts as ethically functional.

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However, the self-preserving aspect of personal freedom points to the fact that immediate freedom is, after all, conditioned on the existence of institutional arrangements that maintain it. Its immediacy, in other words, is mediated.

To begin, if individuals were indeed free to do anything they felt like doing, including not doing anything, Sittlichkeit would disintegrate. While this point could be pursued as a point about the dangers of wrong [Unrecht] or crime—namely, actions that violate the rights of others—and the social mediation involved in enforcing the law and preventing such actions, it is not my focus in this chapter. Rather, I am interested in ways in which society mediates personal freedom not by limiting it but rather by positively shaping its manifestations, that is, by steering the
choices people make. This type of social mediation is less apparent from the point of view of persons in civil society. While I probably know, as a person, that there are certain laws that limit my marital choices—I cannot, say, marry my brother—I am less aware (if at all) of the ways in which society influences me to marry, for example, a person of a similar class and level of education. It is this type of mediation that is most pertinent to my argument. While I take myself to choose immediately whom to marry—to be the sole ground of this action—it turns out not to be the case.

We can call the first type of mediation “negative”, since it limits personal freedom, and the second type “positive” since it shapes personal freedom; it assures that person’s allegedly immediate choices do follow (or mediated by) norms that benefit society as a whole.

Society positively mediates personal or immediate freedom in at least two ways. First, individuals are encouraged by society to take certain decisions. The social order steers individual to choose a marital partner and to choose a professional career that falls under one estate or another. Second, the social order also channels individuals to make choices that would benefit society, given the features of the particular individual and how they relate to the features of others. Hegel says that, indeed, “for the subjective consciousness, [choosing an estate] has the shape of being the product of its own will.” However, it is influenced by the individual’s “natural disposition, birth, and circumstances” (PhR §206). Since at least some of these “circumstances” are socially determined, then the influence they exercise exhibits social mediation of immediate freedom. While a person with poor mathematical skills could choose to be an engineer, society—through schools,
standardized tests, or cultural media—channels him to choose a profession for which he is a better fit.

Hegel’s key concept in articulating this “positive” type of social mediation of personal freedom is what he calls the system of needs [System der Bedürfnisse]. Reflecting on this concept reveals the point of this type of social mediation. To put it differently, while positive social mediation is surely an empirical fact—part of how modern civil society in fact operates—the idea of the system of needs sheds light on why modern civil society ought to so operate. If personal freedom has (what I called above) ethical functions, so we can now see how the social mediation affected by the system of needs is necessary for the fulfillment of these functions.

To recall, the first ethical function of the system of needs is affording an outlet for “self-determined particularity”. However, individual particularity would have remained utterly abstract—and hence unsatisfied—if not realized in the context of the system of needs. Thus, exercises of the personal or particular freedom are only successful—realizing what the person has chosen, the purpose he has set for himself—if they fit into a lawful web composed of other persons’ choices and actions. This coordinated web is the means for realizing the particular person’s purposes. I take myself to be the sole ground of my choice to be a doctor—I immediately will to be a doctor—but this choice can be carried out successfully only because there are institutions like high school, medical school and hospitals in place. These institutions are all “mediations” of my immediate freedom. By having “to fit in with other people,” Hegel says, “I acquire my means of satisfaction from others” (PhR §192Z). I cannot fulfill my goals—realize my particular will—without this
reference to other members of civil society. Moreover, if it is to serve as such means, the activity of others cannot be random; it must exhibit lawful patterns. I have to know these patterns if I am to make good use of others’ activities, just like I have to know natural patterns if I am to utilize nature for my purposes (and I will say more about this analogy below). It is this lawful, patterned activity of members of civil society that constitutes the system of needs. The latter makes “self-determined particularity” determinate (rather than abstract) in the sense that it allows persons to know and employ the means for successfully realizing their choices.

There is another, deeper, sense in which the system of needs makes particularity determinate. Particular purposes are not socially mediated only in the sense that their satisfaction is dependent on socially-provided means but also in their very existence and meaning. Thus, even if we grant that human beings have a “natural”, pre-social need for water, hence there is a sense in which a purpose like ‘drinking’ is not socially-mediated, it is clear that such needs account for a tiny bit of individuals’ needs in a developed society. While there may be a “natural” need for water, civil society generates needs for multiple sorts of liquid that could satisfy this need, to vessels that could contain it, to fine materials that could decorate these vessels, and so on and so forth. Hegel talks about this process as a process of “abstraction”—we begin with a particular or “raw” need, i.e. for drink, then form a general representation of it [Vorstellung] and then the need can be divided and multiplied (PhR §§191-192). So far for my claim that particular needs—and hence the purposes of satisfying them—exist only in relation to the system of needs of civil society. When I say that civil society also makes particular purposes meaningful, I
mean that the latter are intelligible as purposes, as worth-pursuing—only in relation to their place in the Zusammenhang (hanging-together) of the system of needs. Thus, I understand the point of having a fine vessel only if I know what this vessel is for (e.g., for containing wine), what are the other options for consuming it (e.g., in a plastic cup), and so on.

Therefore, personal or immediate freedom can offer an outlet for self-determined particularity (thereby fulfill its first ethical function) only because the system of needs makes exercises of the personal will determinate: it generates needs and purposes for the will, endows them with meaning, and affords the means for successful realization of these purposes.

The second ethical purpose of immediate freedom is economic and cultural progress—and here, as well, the system of needs provides necessary social mediation. Such progress is conditioned on persons being regarded as the “owners” of their achievements in civil society. This incentivizes them to exhibit originality and resilience. Regarding persons as the sole ground of their actions is part of it but cannot be the whole of it. After all, for a particular action to become an “achievement” it must also fit into the “system of needs”. If I’m an entrepreneur who invents a iPhone app which is good for nothing—that nobody else needs or interested in—my invention would hardly count as an “achievement”.

The fact, Hegel says, “that I have to fit in with other people brings the form of universality into play at this point […] I am compelled to produce means whereby others can be satisfied” (PhR §192Z). If I do not accommodate “the form of universality”, my economic actions would not contribute to universal wealth, hence the second ethical
function of immediate freedom would suffer. Incidentally, the system of needs mediates immediate freedom even in spheres—like the art world—in which particularity is (at least prima facie) most prominent. While artists are not judged according to their contribution to the economy, an artistic act would hardly count as an “achievement” if it doesn’t fit into lawful patterns that are nonetheless exhibited in this sphere—peculiar as it may be.

Hegel insists, then, that immediate freedom is nonetheless mediated in the sense that its ethically-functional actualization is conditioned on its fitting into the “system of needs”. Only given the latter, can the individual—paradoxically—bracket or ignore the social mediation of its immediate particularity, namely, conceive of herself as the sole ground of her activity. As Hegel says—and I cite it again, as it crystalizes that point I’ve been making: While civil society exhibits “inner necessity”—objective lawful patterns—“for subjective consciousness, it has the shape of being the product of its own will” (PhR §206). The person, then, entertains a representation that is mistaken, at least in some sense, but this representation—mistaken as it may be—is still necessary. We are finally in a position to address this paradoxical idea.

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The mediation provided by the system of needs does not eliminate the respect in which personal freedom is nonetheless immediate. It is not the case that personal freedom only appears as immediate but is (in truth) mediated, as if this appearance is mere illusion. As Hegel says with respect to immediate knowing (and I will shortly make the analogy explicit), knowledge is both immediate and mediated. It
is also immediate in the sense that it is necessary that the agent would take it to be so immediate, and that her self-conception would be reflected back to her by other subjects and social institutions. Thus, applied to immediate freedom, this point means that individuals should (and can) view their actions in civil society as ultimately based on immediate acts of will, choices that are non-justifiable in reference to universal norms.

My discussion of Hegel’s critique of Spinoza in Chapter III could clarify the idea that immediate freedom (and knowledge) is not “mere illusion”. To recall, Hegel complains that, for Spinoza, particular entities are mere illusion—while they appear from our subjective perspective they are not “necessary”, that is, necessarily follow from an absolute principle. By contrast, immediate freedom, for Hegel, is necessary, in the sense that it is a necessary aspect of absolute social reality, namely, Sittlichkeit. In order for Sittlichkeit to preserve itself, grow and thrive, it must give its subjects the appearance that they are the sole ground of some of their actions—namely, their actions as persons of civil society. Immediate freedom, then, is a subjective appearance, yet one which follows from an absolute purposive principle, namely, Ethical Life. It is in this sense that immediate freedom is not mere illusion; we may call it a necessary appearance, a real appearance (paradoxical as it may sound), or actual appearance, that is, an appearance necessary for the actualization of absolute social reality.

To the extent that immediate freedom is necessary qua appearance—as an image that modern persons have about themselves and their actions—Sittlichkeit also has to deploy means to preserve this appearance. The social mediation of
immediate freedom, then, goes beyond shaping it so that it keeps with its ethical functions; it also concerns maintaining the image that it is *not* so mediated. Earlier I defined “negative” social mediation as limiting immediate freedom, and “positive” mediation as shaping immediate freedom. We now arrived at a third type of mediation—call it “generative” mediation, the mediation involved in generating the appearance of immediacy.

Generative mediation has various manifestations but I would like to focus on one of them, which offers a closure to my argument so far. A crucial means by which modern *Sittlichkeit* generates the appearance of immediacy, I argue, is the worldview I discussed above, namely, the scientific naturalism of the Enlightenment. To recall, I suggested that individuals in civil society take for granted the notion that subjects and objects are real, natural and independent of each other. Given this premise, the ultimate ground for actions can only be particular, immediate acts of will. The Enlightenment worldview, then, supports the notion that persons determine themselves *immediately*, that is, without recourse to what counts as unconditioned norms in their form of life.

To be sure, one could argue that the idea of a system of needs is at odds with this image of persons and their freedom. If we acknowledge that personal freedom is mediated by fitting into a larger lawful system, then it gives rise to the following idea: I am *committed* to following the laws or norms that govern this system, hence my immediate freedom is compromised. However, Enlightenment naturalism also shapes the way the system of needs is represented. Thus, it is not represented as what Hegel calls an “ethical identity” (PhR §186), in the context of which individuals
are essentially committed to follow the norms embedded in the relationship. Rather, the system of needs is represented as a constellation governed by *natural* laws, revealed by empirical science (and specifically, by the newly emerging science of political economy; PhR §189Z). Hegel:

> in the very act of developing itself independently to totality, the principle of particularity passes over into universality, and only in the latter does it have its truth and its right to positive actuality. This unity is not that of ethical identity, because at this level of division, the two principles are independent; and for the same reason, it is present not as *freedom*, but as the *necessity* whereby the *particular* must rise to the form of universality and seek and find its subsistence in this form. (Ibid. §186)

If the system of needs is represented as a natural phenomenon (a “necessity”) rather than a purposeful enterprise subjects are essentially committed to (i.e., as an embodiment of “freedom”) then it doesn’t threaten the normative independence of the modern person (or “the principle of particularity”). The person, moreover, can use it as mere *means* for acquiring subsistence and personal achievements (“positive actuality”).

The worldview of Enlightenment naturalism, then, supports the notion that all actions in civil society are ultimately based on immediate acts of will, while accommodating the fact that our individual wills are usefully coordinated. Within this worldview, our wills *happen* to be coordinated; this fact does not implicate us in rational commitment.
Immediate knowledge as Actualization of Immediate Freedom

Having discussed some of the complexities (or rather functional paradoxes) that underlie modern civil society, I can return to the case with which we started, the example Hegel employs against Jacobi. To recall, I sought to challenge the standard account—represented by Robert Brandom—of Hegel’s distinction between immediate and mediated knowledge. According to Brandom, knowledge is both immediate and mediated in the sense that it can be acquired immediately—that is, by perception rather than inference—but it is also mediated, that is, determinate only in virtue of a conceptual context.

My alternative account begins with the observation that an analogous distinction between immediacy and mediation applies to the practical sphere. Freedom is immediate, I argued, (1) in the sense that the person’s determinations are (taken to be) ultimately based on immediate acts of will, expressed by locutions of the form “I want this”; and (2) in the sense that this image is supported by a worldview which is taken to be immediately true, of no need for justification. However, freedom is also mediated in the sense that personal determinations are socially functional only in the context of spiritual, ethical whole, namely, Sittlichkeit. However, the modern individual typically ignores the aspects in which freedom is mediated, because acknowledging these aspects would threaten his self-conception as personally free, namely, as enjoying fully independent authority. By representing both individual choice and coordination between individuals—the system of needs—as natural phenomena, disclosed by the natural sciences, Enlightenment naturalism serves personal freedom.
Now, how does this apply to the cognitive or theoretical sphere? It might seem that I’m driving at an analogy of sorts—immediate knowledge to mediated knowledge is like immediate freedom to mediated freedom. Yet, following my argument in Chapter III, I want to make a stronger proposal: the theoretical distinction is *grounded* in the practical distinction. This stronger proposal transpires once we appreciate the following idea: for the modern individual, knowledge is (also) a determination of freedom. In Chapter II, I discussed one aspect of this idea. Reading section 4 of the Philosophy of Right, I argued that an act of personal freedom is conditioned on knowing the object of freedom as real in the relevant sense, namely, as what I called “utterly external”. I can now introduce another aspect of this claim, namely, that knowledge is a possession, a property of the individual who owns it. Having knowledge, in this respect, is no different from having a range of other possessions. It is a way in which the person realizes himself in the world and secures the recognition and appreciation of other persons.\(^\text{155}\)

Once we have this idea in view, the following interpretation of the distinction between immediate and mediated knowledge presents itself. In the sphere of civil society, knowledge is immediate in the sense that the individual person is credited as the sole ground of the knowledge-claims he asserts. This image of knowledge

\(^{155}\) Hegel uses the term *Eigentum* very often to denote knowledge or something like knowledge (in the Preface to PhG, it appears in ¶¶28, 29, 30, 32, 36, 37, 70). A telling formulation appears in LHP 103, where Hegel characterize the task of Spirit in the transition to modernity as follows: “Moving within its own property, its own content, and advancing to cognitive knowing, Spirit will for the first time be in motion concretely. This property determines itself on the one hand as outer, worldly being; and it determines itself on the other hand as inner property, divine knowing and striving.” It seems that “property”, then, falls short of cognitive knowing [*Erkennen*] and rather denotes mere “content” [*Inhalt*] that Spirit is conscious of. But if that’s the case, Spirit—even while not having *Erkennen* or conceptual comprehension of its content—still has “immediate knowledge” of it. This quote, in other words, supports the proposal that, for Hegel, immediate knowledge should be understood in terms of immediate actualizations of (personal) freedom—as that which is *my own* [*eigen*] just because I am immediately related to it.
serves necessary ethical functions, i.e., the assertion of particularity and economic and cultural progress, and in this sense—for it is necessary for Sittlichkeit as a whole—this image of knowledge is not a mere illusion but what I called a necessary or actual appearance. Yet, knowledge is also mediated by at least two types of social mediation: positive and generative.

Civil society provides positive mediation in shaping the representations persons have of the world, so that they would fit into the representations other people entertain, mutually constituting the theoretical aspect of the “system of needs”. Hegel gestures at this idea when he says that participation in the system of needs includes accepting “the opinion [Meinung] of others” (PhR §192Z), and that it cultivates a basic set of conventional beliefs that all members of civil society share, e.g., about “the manner of dress and times of meals.” However, the system of needs doesn’t only maintain sufficient uniformity; it also encourages particular differentiation. When one chooses a profession, one also acquires a particular range of knowledge, which acquires relevance by fitting into the specialized domains of knowledge of other individuals (cf. PhR §197). Civil society provides generative mediation as well, that is, it maintains the image entertained by persons that, despite this positive mediation, knowledge is nonetheless immediate. A key facilitator of this generative mediation is modern scientific naturalism.

The last paragraph was modeled after my claim above about the distinction between immediate and mediated freedom. It shows that, to the extent that we conceive of immediate knowledge as a manifestation of immediate freedom, we get an account of the distinction between immediate and mediated knowledge that
explains why modern individuals are so attached to the idea that knowledge is immediate. They are so attached, the proposal goes, because it serves their interest as persons in civil society, who are committed to demonstrating their normative independence while promoting their personal goals.

Recall the example that Hegel directs at Jacobi. “I know immediately about America”. When a person makes this claim, we credit him with this knowledge, taking him to be the sole ground of this knowledge. Indeed, the truth is that he has this knowledge only thanks to the coordinated actions of other persons, e.g., those who had built the ship on which he sailed to America. Furthermore, this knowledge has a point—is meaningful in this respect—because it fits into the knowledge, needs and actions of others. Note that the truth of the immediate knowledge-claim (if it’s true) is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the knowledge-claim to succeed as a realization of freedom. Thus, if I express an utterly inconsequential fact—say the number of tiles on my roof—this would probably not assert my freedom, for it has no bearing on the knowledge or the actions of other members of civil society. And then, if I assert a mistake (or even a lie) that fits well with a common view, let alone one which promotes the interests of a sufficient number of people, this could very well be a successful demonstration of personal authority. In other words, a knowledge-claim owes its efficacy as a manifestation of freedom to “the system of needs”. And yet, since we represent the “system of needs” as a natural phenomenon—given scientific naturalism—this fact does not place the individual knower in what Hegel calls “an ethical identity”, namely, in commitment to the
norms of his form of life. He can maintain his self-conceived normative independence.

**Summary: The Remedy of Dogmatism**

In Chapter II and III, I have argued that the modern individual—in his capacity as a person in civil society—has sufficient self-confidence to stick to the dogmatic side of modern skepticism. Indeed, he tends to doubt the existence of an absolute principle that could justify his knowledge. Yet, this does not make the modern individual any less dogmatic with respect to the knowledge provided by the natural sciences. I also pointed to the nihilistic threat inherent to this standpoint, insofar as modern individuals may face their groundlessness. Their image of the world—including of their own freedom and authority—would suddenly appear arbitrary and alienating.

My argument in the current chapter has so far articulated a few reasons why modern skepticism, given the features of modern civil society, retains such power and presence. This power, I suggest, amounts to an *ethical remedy* to skepticism. This sounds paradoxical: how can the power of modern skepticism be an ethical remedy to modern skepticism? My answer: insofar as modern skepticism promotes patterns of social activity that support its *dogmatic* side (the one bound with the commitment to “immediate knowledge”), then it constitutes an ethical remedy against its skeptical side, as it were, keeping the latter from transpiring in nihilism.

And yet, such “dogmatic” remedies are far from being sufficient. The next (and final) section reconstructs a few ways in which the nuclear family compensates for this insufficiency.
Imagine two individuals sitting next to each other on a rock—on the beach, perhaps. The sun is setting. It’s twilight time. Let us stipulate that they are lovers. Over a few years of their relationship, they’ve watched more than a few sunsets together. But this one is different. Recently they’ve been having “problems”. It’s not as good as it used to be. In fact, it’s quite bad. Their future together is less certain than ever before. There’s a short silence, only for John to disrupt it with a sudden, loud, utterance. “The sun is setting,” he says.

John uttered a knowledge-claim but it would be all too simple, even simplistic, to explain it only as a reaction to a piece of reality. Indeed, the sun is setting. But within the situation, John was clearly trying to convey something else. It was a roundabout way to say something about the relationship. The sun was (also) a metaphor. Otherwise we cannot explain the fact that, following his statement, he’s in tense anticipation of Jack’s response. If it is just about the sun, John has sufficient cognitive authority to own the knowledge-claim regardless of how Jack (or anyone) would respond. However, if it is about the relationship, it is precisely about not having sufficient cognitive authority. We can put it this way: to be in a loving relationship means that there is domain of reality your knowledge of which is mediated by the way your loved one knows it. Your knowledge, then, is not immediate—and, unlike the situation in civil society, the mediation involved is not ignored; the partners to the relationship acknowledge it.

In his *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, Stanley Cavell draws a distinction between a rule-based relationship and what he calls a “moral
relationship”. The paradigmatic case of the former is a contractual relationship, in which the rules (that the parties agreed upon) serve as the ultimate appeal in any possible controversies. It is assumed that each of the parties has an independent and sufficient knowledge of the contractual rules, and each can appeal to these rules if the other fails to follow them. In a moral relationship—under which marriage and love fall—there might be rules but they do not enjoy this final or ultimate status. If, for example, I broke a promise I had made to my husband, this is not, in itself, a reason to impose a pre-determined sanction, e.g., by appealing to a rule of the form: “If you break a promise, you have to compensate the other by doing X”. What would happen, once the promise was broken, is dependent on an array of contextual circumstances—if I have broken other promises in recent past, if my husband has done so, the quality of the reasons or excuses I cite for failing to fulfill the promise, our emotional rapport at the relevant time, and so on. At some point I—or my husband—could appeal to an external umpire, but this would not be a move within the moral relationship but one that terminates or risks terminating it. Let me quote Cavell at length:

[Y]ou and I had an understanding—so I say; maybe you say so too, or deny it. No judge or rule knows better than we, and we have no rules that will decide the issue or that will rule one of us out as incompetent to decide. This is why there is a moral argument between us, why it has its forms. No explicit promise would have been more sacred than our understanding, or, given our supposed mutual trust, even appropriate. I may forgive you in response to, or ask for, your heartfelt apology and your promise not to repeat what (you know, knew, perfectly well) so pained me. If you repeat it I may decide you are
A moral relationship, then, is a relationship in which (1) there is no ultimate authority that could offer a final judgment in controversies between the parties; and (2) each party's understanding of the situation is mediated by the understanding of the other. I want to be clear here. It is not the case that (2) holds because of an epistemic limitation on part of either of the parties. It is not that they lack epistemic 
*tools*, hence have to cooperate with the other in the task, say, of representing a given situation. Rather, to be in a moral relationship just *is* to accept that a certain realm of reality is produced and reproduced by mutual conversation.

My comments so far point to the radical difference between two spheres of modern *Sittlickeit*, civil society and the family. They presuppose two very different ways to conceive of the individual. In civil society, as we saw, the individual is in a state of antithesis with the world and with other individuals. He can, and is even encouraged, to use others as a means for promoting his (personal, immediate goals).

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156 Cavell (1990), 114.
The family, on the other hand, constitutes what Hegel calls an “ethical identity”. The individual, within this unity, takes her normative authority to be thoroughly mediated by her relation to her lover.

This contrast has occupied Hegel from the very beginning of his philosophical career. In an early fragment on love (1797/8), he draws a seemingly irreconcilable distinction between a community marked by love and unity, and a community of independent property owners.\textsuperscript{157} The former, it seems—full of life and bliss—is doomed to dissolve into the deadening latter. At this point, then, the young Hegel seems to be pessimistic about the prospects of reconciling these two types of relationship. By contrast, the \textit{Philosophy of Right}—a product of Hegel’s mature philosophy—constitutes an attempt to offer such reconciliation.\textsuperscript{158} In the remainder of this chapter I focus on one aspect of this reconciliation, namely, the ways in which the modern family—or more specifically, marital love (leaving the rearing of children aside)—mitigate the skepticism generated by civil society, thereby keeping the threat of nihilism under control. As part of this focus, my comments above on love—inspired by Cavell’s discussion—will remain suggestive. While I elaborate on the difference between love and civil society, it is only to the degree that this difference reveals an unlikely continuity, namely, ways in which the family \textit{supports} modern civil society.

\textsuperscript{157} Hegel (1961), 303. The fragment is notoriously difficult. I benefitted from the interpretation offered in Butler (2015).

\textsuperscript{158} \textsc{Lucács} (1976) and \textsc{Marcuse} (1968) both stress Hegel’s disenchantment with love, so to speak, in the transition to his mature system. Love is no longer a basic principle of social life, let alone a medium of intuitive absolute knowledge. While the \textit{Philosophy of Right} is a reconciliation, the animating force of modern \textit{Sittlichkeit}—which modifies both the family and the state as they’ve been inherited from antiquity—is not love but rather the contrasting principle of civil society. See Wood (1990), 240. And yet, in the following I discuss a few respects in which love, even if secondary, is necessary.,
Modern Love: An Apparent Paradox

If we are to articulate the respects in which the family mitigates the ethically problematic aspects of civil society, we should begin with the intersections between these spheres. Hegel's discussion of the family offers two such intersections: (1) the family trains its children to be full members of civil society, possessors of personal freedom; and (2) the family provides the member of civil society with a sphere in which he can enjoy “a peaceful intuition of this unity”, namely, his “independent unity with himself” (PhR §166). The following discussion centers on (2), namely, showing how the marital relationship, in Hegel’s construal, provides the person with the sense of “unity” he lacks in civil society—or, as I sometimes prefer to put it, with the grounding he is always in danger of losing.

Before I begin, though, I’d like to make an important exegetical remark. There is an obvious respect in which Hegel's account of marital love seems dated, namely, his understanding of the relationship between the sexes, and of the female sex in particular. I chose to set this issue aside. Moreover, I discuss marital love as the relationship between two subjects who, even if are not equal in authority, are also not utterly unequal. In my account, one of the spouses (so husband included) can always be challenged about his behavior, made responsible to the other in reference to norms they both share. This might seem to be at odds with the clear hierarchy between husband and wife that Hegel recommends. However, hierarchy does not

159 “[R]uhige Anschauung” of “die selbständige Einheit mit sich”. I modified the translation from “self-sufficient” to “independent” unity, as I feel the latter better captures the person’s condition in civil society (in line with my basic interpretation thereof).
entail absolute power.\textsuperscript{160} Some of the things Hegel says about marriage—e.g., that it is the unity of \textit{two} persons, or that difference between the spouses is necessary for a successful marriage (see below)—would make no sense if we thought of marriage as the absolute power of a husband-tyrant over his wife-slave. Marriage, obviously, is not ownership. This is part of what follows from the fact—which Hegel is never tired of stressing—that the modern family is not the traditional “immediate” family or clan. Nevertheless, I am not going to defend my line of interpretation against others. I believe I offer a valid \textit{charitable} interpretation of Hegel, one that shows his enduring relevance without losing sight of the text. Yet, it is not to say that other interpretations, more attuned to Hegel’s conservative leanings, are not similarly valid from an exegetical point of view.\textsuperscript{161}

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We can start off with an apparent paradox, or at least a tension, in Hegel’s account of the family. On the one hand, he suggests that the family affords the person of civil society a peaceful intuition of his “independent unity with himself”. On the other hand, Hegel claims that in the marital relationship, the partners “share the totality of their existence”,\textsuperscript{162} and moreover, become a “single person” (\textit{eine Person}; PhR §§162, 163R). How, then, the latter features of the familial relationship—which

\textsuperscript{160} Cf. Wood (1990), 245.

\textsuperscript{161} Benhabib (1996) and O’Brien (1996) suggest that Hegel’s overt sexism in the \textit{Philosophy of Right} has to do with his endorsement of the modern rationalist ideal—in contrast to the romantic attachments of his philosophical youth. Since my treatment of his account of the family is influenced by a reading of his early texts on love, I might be downplaying his conservative turn. And yet, the following discussion is based almost entirely on the \textit{Philosophy of Right}.

\textsuperscript{162} PhR, §163: \textit{Gemeinsamkeit der ganzen individuellen Existenz”}.
seem to imply a total surrender of individuality—allow the family member to affirm his own independence?

Settling this apparent paradox requires modifying our understanding of both aspects of the family—the alleged surrender of personality and its being a sphere in which one’s independence is affirmed. To begin with the first aspect, I suggest understanding Hegel’s talk about a “single person” and “sharing the totality of existence” not as denoting a stable state, but rather as an ongoing process, a task. To see what I mean, recall Cavell’s discussion of a moral relationship. The parties in a moral relationship share their experience in the sense that they see themselves as committed to sustaining a shared understanding of their existence—both of their relationship and of aspects of the world that relate to it (e.g., the sunset in the example I provided). Therefore, sharing my existence with another does not mean that I surrender myself to the will of the other—nor that we both surrender to an external authority—but rather that I remain committed to his point of view and that I feel that the other is similarly committed to me. This is one sense in which in love “I gain validity in the other” (PhR §158Z). It doesn’t only mean that I can retain my individual authority but that I must retain it. Sharing as an ongoing process, as a task, only makes sense when at least two parties bring their own perspective to bear in an effort to maintain a shared understanding.

This interpretation of “sharing existence” might seem to be at odds with Hegel’s claim that the family constitutes a “single person”. Single, after all, is quite clearly different from “two”. However, as we saw in Chapter II, even an individual person (so truly “single”, no even as a metaphor) is an ongoing task. To recall, Hegel
says that a person signifies a contradiction—between her abstract freedom and her particular determinations, namely, the fact that she is externally determined in every respect. To be a person, then, is the ongoing task of holding these determinations together, as it were, being able to conceive of oneself—and get recognition from others—as the unifying principle of these determinations, that which makes them all mine. Some human beings (and people suffering from certain psychopathologies are a case in point) fail to fulfill this task; they are not able to lend sufficient unity and continuity to their personhood. A similar logic, I suggest, applies to the marital relationship. For marriage to be a “single person” means that both parties are committed to sustaining the unity and continuity of their shared existence, including a shared picture of the world. It is in this sense that they are a single person, rather than in the sense that presupposes that they had renounced their individual authority.

Only such an interpretation of the family as “single person”—in which the parties retain their particular authority—can sufficiently distinguish the modern family (that Hegel recommends) from the traditional family (that he rejects), namely, a family not composed of the married couple and their children but of a whole clan. In the latter, it would be customary to wed blood relations, while in the former it is unacceptable. And what is Hegel’s reason for this ban? In the traditional family—a “naturally identical circle of people”—individuals “do not have a distinct personality of their own in relation to one another.” By contrast, the modern couple must exhibit a sufficient degree of difference—they must join the union as two persons, hence two foci of authority. Indeed, the goal is to “surrender the personality”. Yet, only if the
parties are sufficiently unique persons prior to marriage, can they constitute a proper unity after marriage. As Hegel puts it,

Familiarity, acquaintance, and the habit of shared activity should not be present before marriage; they should be discovered only within it, and the value of the discovery is all the greater the richer it is and the more components it has. (PhR §168Z)

It is not immediately clear why the (prior) uniqueness of the parties should make the unity better. Hegel only cites a familiar organist trope as an explanation. “[T]he power of recreation,” he says, “like that of the Spirit, increases with the magnitude of oppositions out of which it reconstitutes itself.” I believe my interpretation of marriage being a “single person” makes sense of this point. Insofar as we are not only unified but also differentiate ourselves from each other, the ongoing dialogue between us—which sustains our shared picture of the world—is more dynamic and alive. This serves to reinforce my point above, namely, that the post-wedding unity does not entail the elimination of individual authority or perspective but, rather, a shared commitment to the authority of the other.163

Now, how does this account of marital love shed light on Hegel’s claim that marriage allows the person to affirm his independent unity with himself? Even in the interpretation I am pursuing, marital love does involve some compromise of one’s personality. Answering this question would reveal the respects in which marital love mitigates the skepticism inherent to personal freedom.

163 Cf. Hegel (1961), 307: “This wealth of life loves acquires in the exchange of every thought, every variety of inner experience, for it seeks out differences and devises reunifications ad infinitum; it turns to the whole manifold of nature in order to drink love out of every life.”
We should first recall a key idea of this dissertation. To be a person is to be in a state of *disunity*, even “rupture” with the world. Insofar as personal freedom is conditioned on a *negation* of the unity between the individual and her immediate form of life, the person represents the world as other to her. As we saw earlier in this chapter, civil society offers ways to sustain this disunity—e.g., by presenting it as “natural”, by assigning it ethical functions, etc. Nevertheless, in the absence of rational, ultimate grounding, the dogmatic naturalism that characterizes the members of civil society can easily transpire in nihilism. The person may always ask herself yet another why-question: why am I to determine myself in the way I do? Given such a question, the person’s existence may suddenly appear groundless.

It is on this background that we are to understand the function of the family as affording the person a “peaceful intuition of his unity with himself”. Insofar as he enjoys this intuition, he has the means to avoid the ills of nihilism. There are at least four ways in which the family generates this sense of unity. I shall discuss them in turn.

**The Family and Personal Unity I: Peace and Quiet**

The first way in which the family affords “peaceful intuition” is quite straightforward. In civil society, as it is marked by struggle, the person must constantly be on guard, as it were, represent and understand new situations, and respond to them competently. Once he is at home, in the company of his family, he can lie back and relax. He does not feel that he must *struggle* to win bread, not even recognition. In the family, he can feel secure in his possession of resources and as the
object of care. In such condition, the person can reflect on his life outside the family—i.e., in civil society—and notice things that he cannot notice in the hustle and bustle of everyday economic life. However, this feature of familial life—that it allows its members relative peace and quite—could backfire. After all, once one has time to reflect on one's life, one could also fall into despair... Let us move, then, to other features of the family that make it the case that, once the family affords him space and time for contemplation, the person would actually be content with what he sees.

**The Family and Personal Unity II: Caring for Others**

The second way in which the family lends unity to one's activity in civil society is by furnishing the person with a higher purpose than sheer self-interest. Hegel makes this point in his discussion of the family resources. “[A]bstract property contains the arbitrary moment of the particular need of the single individual,” he says, but “this is here transformed, along with the selfishness of desire, into care and acquisition for a communal purpose, i.e. into an ethical unity.” (PhR §170) Thus, on the face of it, the single individual exhibits a unity whose principle is his self-interest. It is his understanding of his self-interest that makes him act on some desires rather than others and satisfy specific needs, or: insofar as his deeds contribute to realizing his self-interest, they can be said to be his, namely, unified with him. However, this is not a proper unity since self-interest is not governed by norms. One's conception of his self-interest may change rapidly, which would lead, in turn, to random uses of one's property. In other words, self-interest is “arbitrary” and coupled with “abstract”
property, that is, property the use of which is not governed by norms. By contrast, the consciousness that the person is committed to the secure livelihood of his family members lends the missing unity. Suddenly self-interest is mediated by higher norms, e.g., the norm that I ought to take care of my family.

Consider John, an eligible bachelor in his early thirties. Having worked as a lawyer for a few years, he has acquired substantial property. His conception of his self-interest dictates that he continues to accumulate property, and that he spends it in ways that John takes to be conducive to his physical and mental health. Yet, this conception can easily change. For a while, after a visit to India, he thought it would be better to work less. He ended up returning to his old, workaholic ways. For a different while, he had thought he should hit them gym regularly, but a few months later he decided to switch to a daily dose of yoga. In his worse moments, in the privacy of his home after a long day at the office, John feels it is all too arbitrary, empty, abstract. Why do this rather than that? And what, after all, is my self-interest? He asks himself, bordering on despair.

Now, let us visit John ten years later. He is now married to Laura and they have two children. Everything is much more lucid now. It is clear why he should work hard—he wants to make sure his children get the best education; he wants to leave them an inheritance that will secure their future livelihood. In the privacy of his home, after a long day at the office, he can look at his young children and have a strong sense of purpose. This, in turn, finally lends unity and weight to his activity as a person of civil society. His money is no longer abstract—in the sense that he can do
with it whatever he wants; it now has the concreteness of the family resources; its use is mediated by norms.

**The Family and Personal Unity III: Natural Vitality**

With respect to the second way in which marital love lends unity or grounding to the person of civil society, a question arises. Why is it the case that caring for one’s family members provides such grounding, a “higher purpose” as I called it? Could such grounding be rather provided by associations based on *friendship*, in which it is care for my friends that gives me the higher purpose often lacking in civil society? I think Hegel’s answer is a resounding ‘no’. Without a family, he says, the person of civil society is free “either to expend his entire resources in accordance with his caprices, opinions, and individual ends, or to regard a circle of friends, acquaintances, etc. so to speak as taking the place of the family” (PhR §179). The grim terms with which Hegel depicts the first option reflects the problems I have discussed with respect to civil society. But Hegel is no less negative about the second option as well, saying that within such a cordial association, “the ethical moment is extremely vague.” (PhR §179Z). One sense in which it is vague, I suggest, is that it doesn’t provide the individual with the grounding that the family provides. What is the source of this difference? Why can’t the person’s friends be his “chosen family” (as it is nowadays sometimes called)?

The answer, I believe, lies in what Hegel calls the “natural vitality” of marriage. “[S]ince it is a substantial relationship,” he says, “this involves life in its totality, namely, as the actuality of the species [*Gattung*] and its process” (PhR §161).
Hegel thereby returns to a point he makes in his early fragment on love. Love, he says, contains “the whole of life”\textsuperscript{164} To put it simply, there is something \textit{natural} about love and marriage. By entering a marital relationship and doing things that are associated with it—sex, bearing children, taking care of them—the individual gets a sense of being alive, which is only possible, in turn, by playing one’s proper part in the living whole—the species and its vital process. Hegel’s use of the term “substantial” is revealing. Insofar as the individual is part of a “substantial relationship” there is a sense in which he is less of a subject, less reflective. There is something so \textit{clear} about his belonging to this relationship—and his commitment to what follows from it—that reflection about it doesn’t even come up.

This point about marriage is in undeniable tension with at least two other things Hegel says and which I mentioned above. First, the modern family is \textit{not} immediate or natural, in the sense that it is different from the traditional clan. It is a peculiarly modern phenomenon. Second, marital love is the relationship between two \textit{subjects}, committed to the ongoing task of maintaining their unity. Therefore, I think we should understand Hegel’s point about the “natural vitality” of marriage in loose and comparative terms. After all, he immediately adds that marriage is also a “spiritual union, a self-conscious love” (PhR §161). So it is not the case that marital partners \textit{never} reflect on the basic norms of the relationship (e.g., how to care for their children), but that they do it very rarely and that the chances this reflection would change anything are meager. Moreover, in marital relationship there is much

\textsuperscript{164} Hegel (1961), 305.
less reflection on such basic norms in comparison with other spheres of modern Sittlichkeit.

So what is unique about the family in relation to a cordial association? The fact that the modern family, while not being the traditional clan, still has the power to make the modern individual feel that he is part of life as a whole, that there are purposes so clear and basic that they are (almost) beyond reflection. Thanks to this feature, a norm like “one ought to care for one’s children” is endowed with a tremendous force, which provides, in turn, much-needed grounding for the person of civil society.

The Family and Personal Unity IV: The Affirmation of Love

The fourth way in which the family lends unity to one's activities in civil society concerns the sort of recognition that it affords its members, namely, a recognition of their unique features. The contrast is with two sorts of recognition given to persons in civil society. I discussed them in Chapter II, upon introducing my account of personal freedom, so in the following I elaborate on some of the points, juxtaposing them against the sort of recognition peculiar to the family, i.e., love.

To begin, persons in civil society are accorded respect. To recognize the other as a person is to respect her right (within a limited sphere) to determine herself as she pleases. Respect is abstract in the sense that it is given to any person whatsoever, regardless of her particular features. This, in turn, affects the range of actions or attitudes by which respect is paradigmatically expressed. I respect another mostly by not performing certain actions that would have encroached her
rights; what I think or feel about it is mostly beside the point. Even when “positive” actions are involved, they don’t entail an attitude towards the respected person’s particular features. For example, if I believe that respecting the other as a person includes securing a minimal standard of living for her, I may take a “positive” action to this end—that is, not only avoid certain actions—yet it does not follow that I approve of this particular person.

Having said that, Hegel says that civil society also offers its members recognition of their particular features:

[Each individual, 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 in the eyes of others. (PhR §207)]

A member of civil society is not just an abstract person; she also has her specific excellences, talents and professional and creative achievements. It is for these unique features that she wins what Hegel calls honor, or what I’ve called—in order to clearly demarcate it from respect—esteem. Unlike respect, esteem is manifested not by “negative” actions but by a wide range of attitudes—feelings, thoughts, judgments of taste, the approving gaze in the other’s eyes, and so on.

Now, both sorts of recognition—respect and esteem—are necessary yet insufficient for mitigating skepticism. Respect is necessary since it gives rise to self-respect, the sense that one’s desires and views are worthwhile and worth expressing and executing. However, since respect is abstract—granted to a person just in

\[165\] The relation between respect and self-respect is offered by Rawls (1974), 440. The same relation applies
virtue of being a person—the self-confidence it generates must be limited. By being respected, one doesn’t win approval for her specific or concrete views and desires. Since I know that all persons are granted equal respect, mere respect may rather make me feel generic, adding an air of arbitrariness to my particular attitudes. After all, I would have won the same respect even if I had thoroughly different ones! Esteem, by giving rise to self-esteem, goes a long way in filling the lacuna left by mere respect. By feeling the esteem of others, I gain confidence in my unique desires and views, which allows me, in turn, to express and realize them even in the face of much hardship. Therefore, insofar as the dogmatic side of modern skepticism ultimately rests on immediate acts of will—whose validity is grounded in the individual’s self-confidence—both respect and esteem help to keep modern skepticism from deteriorating into nihilism.

However, even the esteem granted in civil society is insufficient for shielding its members from the nihilistic potential of skepticism, and this for three reasons. First, not all persons of civil society have unique features, let alone professional achievements, for which they can win esteem. To be sure, Hegel’s theory of modern civil society includes measures that are supposed to keep the number of non-esteemed people as low as possible. The key institution, in this connection, is the corporation, namely, a professional association of individuals employed in a specific domain of the economy. Within the corporation—and by fellow members of the corporation—the individual enjoys esteem for the very fact that she pursues a definite occupation. There is no need to present exceptional achievements in order to esteem and self-esteem (Rawls himself confounds these two sorts of recognition).
to earn esteem. “In the corporation,” Hegel says, “the two [i.e., livelihood and capability] are also recognized, so that the member of a corporation has no need to demonstrate his competence and his regular income—i.e., the fact that he is somebody—by any further external evidence... he has his honor in his estate.” (PhR §253; Hegel's italics). However, even in Hegel's ideal civil society, there are individuals who are pushed outside any estate, namely, the desolate rabble [Pöbel; PhR §244]. The problem with the rabble is not merely poverty, but also its vulnerability to the threat of nihilism.

The second reason why esteem is insufficient lies in the fact that, by nature, it is distributed unequally. Therefore, even people who do have unique achievements can easily start comparing themselves unfavorably to people who have even greater achievements. In such conditions, it is easy for one to lose confidence in one’s own determinations.

Recall John, the eligible bachelor from the example above. Much as he is a successful lawyer, there are probably lawyers who are much more successful—even in his own age group and with similar education. It is, moreover, impossible to ignore this fact. After all, the esteem that John does enjoy is conditioned on the same evaluative framework in reference to which he fares less good than others. John, then, is caught in an unhappy dilemma: on the one hand, the esteem he earns for his professional success lends grounding and affirmation to his life, including the ways in which he has chosen to determine himself. On the other hand, enjoying this esteem is coupled with acknowledging the fact that he not as successful as others,
and this, in turn, may undermine his self-confidence, and make him wonder why he hasn’t determined himself differently, e.g., by choosing a different profession.

Again, also in this case, Hegel’s corporation serves to minimize the problem. It makes it the case that within a specific professional field, there is a basic—and equal—degree of esteem that all members enjoy. We can infer this by way of contrast with Hegel’s grim assessment of the life of people who are not members of a corporation:

He is without the honor of belonging to an estate, his isolation reduces him to the selfish aspect of his trade, and his livelihood and satisfaction lack stability. He will accordingly try to gain recognition through the external manifestations of success in his trade, and these are limitless. (PhR §253R)

An “isolated” person—not tied to a corporation—does not enjoy this basic and equal esteem which Hegel deems “the honor of belonging to an estate”. Such esteem is granted to a member by the very fact that he employs his skills in his field. Without it, he must seek esteem through “external manifestations”. I understand the latter as the range of signs that stand for success in a given context. Thus, one could be making a bit more money, or have a bit more fame, or have more followers on social media. These manifestations are “external” both in the straightforward sense that they can be seen (or, more generally, sensed), but also in the sense that they can be misleading, as in how “external” is often contrasted with “substantive” or “true”. To return to John, his sense that other lawyers fare better than him may be based on

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166 Note that “equal” here does not mean universally equal. The member of the corporation is accorded esteem for his particular features, albeit features he shares with a group of others. So the distinction between esteem and respect (which is universally equal) is not lost.
such “external manifestations” such as: how much money they make a year, the fact they were mentioned once or twice by the legal correspondent of the New York Times, or the size of their office in SoHo. Such facts are not only easily accessible, they are often meant to be accessible, that is, give the appearance of success, even if they fall short of indicating substantive success. The question arises, what does indicate substantive success? I think that for Hegel, it is precisely the corporation that is supposed to define it. By offering a basic and equal level of success that all members can achieve, the corporation keeps them from the endless race after external, superficial manifestations of success. Had they been in this race, Hegel says, their satisfaction would have “lacked stability,” thereby open the door to what I have called nihilism. For, the absence of stable esteem for their unique determinations unsettles their grounding, and, as I suggested above, makes them lose confidence in themselves and/or prompt them into an endless race that would result in such loss of confidence.

To be sure, even within a corporation, some members probably do better than others. However, this doesn’t undermine the standing of the less successful members—prompting nihilistic tendencies—since the latter are cognizant of the fact (1) that the corporation at large—including those (like themselves) with lesser achievements—makes possible the success of those who fare better, and (2) that the success of the more successful will end up benefitting the lesser, too. A fitting analogy is the family. Even if one of the parents stays home, so in some sense his standing is lesser than the parent who is out working, he knows that her work is only possible thanks to his contribution at home, and that he—and the children—
would benefit from her success. This is at least part of what Hegel means when he says that “[w]ithin the corporation, the help which poverty receives loses it contingent and unjustly humiliating character, and wealth, in fulfilling the duty it owes the association, loses the ability to provoke arrogance in its possessor and envy in others” (PhR §253R).

However, even Hegel’s corporation does not counter the third reason for why esteem is insufficient for eliminating nihilism. The third reason is inherent to the notion of esteem, or rather: it is necessarily bound with esteem once the esteemed subjects are committed to personal freedom. After all, to be personally free, is to take myself to be the absolute authority with respect to my determinations. However, in order to be the object of esteem—and have corresponding self-esteem—I must determine myself in ways that would grant me the esteem of others. This, in turn, violates my absolute authority as a person.

To see what I have in mind, consider again John’s case. If John is to earn the esteem of fellow lawyers, he is to act in ways, and express views, that are considered worthwhile in this definite context. In so determining himself, John commits himself to norms that articulate the evaluative framework of this context, e.g., that representing clients of a certain sort is good, or that one ought to think that the judicial system is well functioning. John thereby subjects his arbitrary, independent will—the fundamental feature of personhood—to a set of higher norms. Granted, John could be following these norms merely as a means to promote his success. But if that is the case, then esteem loses its power to affirm or ground John’s determinations. In order to ground John’s personal determinations, esteem-inducing
norms cannot be yet another instrument of the person but, rather, enjoy genuine authority over him.

Admittedly, there seems to be a problem with the claim that esteem may only be an instrument for members of civil society, thereby fail to ground their personal determinations. The problem is in the premise, namely, that members of civil society only subscribe to personal freedom. After all, Hegel rather says that a field of professional activity in civil society is a sphere in which “morality has its proper place” (PhR §207). If this is the case, then members of civil society can indeed easily enjoy esteem. They are not only persons but also moral subjects in the sense that their freedom is mediated by a set of positive norms. It is by recognizing these norms as authoritative that they can enjoy the esteem they receive on the basis of these norms. According to this logic, John the lawyer should ideally have no problem with the norms of his profession. In choosing this profession he identifies with these norms. There is a sense, then, that in entering a corporation, he ceases to be a mere person and becomes a moral subject—not unlike joining a martial relationship (and, indeed, Hegel calls the corporation a “second family” (PhR §252)—though below I explain why second falls short of the first).

This objection goes back to a point I made in the Introduction, if only because it is basic to my overall argument in this dissertation. It touches on a genuine tension in Hegel’s theory of civil society. It seems that members of civil society oscillate between two images of themselves—as abstract, immediate, independent persons, on the one hand, and as moral subjects, on the other. With respect to the matter at hand, rather than decide the precise balance between personal and moral freedom
in the corporation, I would like to make a point which I hope is non controversial: this balance is very delicate. Admittedly, members of a corporation are supposed, according to Hegel, to identify with the esteem-inducing norms of the association, and given such identification, the esteem they receive could serve as genuine grounding for their personal determinations. However, since the corporation is, at the end of the day, still part of civil society, personal freedom doesn’t lose its grip on its members. They entered into the corporation out of their free choice, and they can leave it at choice. Therefore, the potential inherent to personal freedom—that of distancing oneself from any set of norms the person follows—still hovers, and the person can find himself alienated from these very norms. Having said that, rather than pursue this point as a negative point about the corporation, I would like to use it to return to my discussion of the familial sphere and make a positive point.

It is telling that Hegel deems the corporation a “second family”. One of the senses in which it is a family, I suggest, is that the members are supposed to identify with the norms inherent to the association. In this sense the corporation presents an “ethical unity” of sorts. However, it is only the *second* family. What is unique about the *first* family?

While civil society grants its members respect and esteem, the family grants its members *love*. While respect is offered unconditionally regardless of one’s particular features, and esteem is conditioned on particular features, love is offered unconditionally for particular features. I believe that this defining feature of love fills the lacuna left by esteem, surely for individuals who are not tied to a corporation but even for those who are.

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Thus, insofar as the family member feels that other members accept him unconditionally—not because he is an abstract person (for which he enjoys respect) but because of the specific individual he is, with his particular features—he earns a substantial grounding to the choices he makes in his capacity as a person of civil society. The advantage of love over esteem in offering such grounding is twofold. First, love affirms all features of the individual, not only features that count as worthwhile given a certain evaluative framework. Second, love is unconditional, so there is nothing determinate the individual would do which would make fellow family members deny their love. I shall discuss these aspects in turn.

We can bring out the advantage of love over esteem by highlighting a surprising logical connection between love and personal freedom. Thus, to subscribe to personal freedom, is to take oneself to have the right to determine oneself freely—without grounding one’s choice in a higher norm. And love, as I explicate it, is the affirmation of every determination of the loved individual regardless of norms. It seems, then, that love corresponds to and augments respect: both—taken together—are the forms of recognition proper to personal freedom. Esteem, on the other hand, is mediated by commitment to a set of norms. Therefore, the person—who seeks to retain her absolute authority—may find herself alienated from the esteem she enjoys so that this esteem would no longer ground her determinations.

Having said that, my construal of love might seem to fly in the face of ordinary experience. If love is unconditional and given to all features of the loved one, how come couples divorce? The possibility of divorce seems to presuppose the idea that some features of one’s spouse are not features one would be willing to
tolerate, let alone love. And even within a marriage, partners would often contest each other. If love were as accepting as I depict it, lovers would never quarrel. Moreover, while the focus of my discussion is love between marital partners, it seems my claims don’t even apply to parental love. The latter cannot mean unconditional affirmation since it is the parents’ responsibility to educate their children, that is, make them avoid certain determinations and encourage others. Or as Hegel puts it: “The right of the parents over the arbitrary will of the children is determined by the end of bringing them up an subjecting them to discipline” (PhR §174).

In response to this objection, let me first quote Hegel. Love, he says, is “the consciousness of my unity with another” (PhR §158Z). A bit later he adds—and I cited it above—that “the family is a single person”. It is precisely in this sense—of being a unity, a single person even—that love is unconditional. To be sure, Hegel suggests that also corporations in civil society exhibit a unity, while—as I argued above—it is not love that they offer their members but (not unconditional) esteem or “honor”. However, I believe that the family exhibits a different sort of unity than the corporation, indeed an *unconditional* unity rather than conditional. The corporation is a conditional unity in the sense that it unifies its members in pursuit of a determinate purpose—realizing themselves in their professional field. An individual becoming a member of the corporation is conditioned on her avowing this purpose, and she may leave the corporation if she disavows this purpose. Marriage, by contrast, does not have such a definite purpose. In this connection, I suggest taking Hegel’s likening of marriage to becoming a “single person” very
literally. The person’s fundamental purpose, what make him a person, is not any specific purpose that he may set for himself, but simply maintaining his unity, keep being a person. The same, according to Hegel, applies to marriage. It is often argued that the purpose of marriage—if it has any—is procreation. But interestingly, Hegel presents the bearing of children not as the purpose of marriage but rather as an expression or realization of it. It is not that one enters into marriage in order to reproduce; one enters a marriage simply because one wants to become “one person” with another person; there is no “higher goal”, as it were. It is in this sense that love is unconditional—it is not pursued and maintained for the sake of a definite purpose.

Admittedly, love sometimes ends, and Hegel allows even for marriage to end. But this is not to say that love is conditional. As long as it happens—felt—love is unconditional. If love were subject to a definite purpose—e.g., bearing children or saving money by filing taxes together—then it were to end once the purpose is no longer realized. It would be subject to a calculation of sorts. But love is a feeling, and as such it is not part of such reckoning. Since “marriage contains the moment of feeling, it is [...] unstable, and it has within it the possibility of dissolution (PhR §163Z). Because love is a feeling, then, it is unconditional but can nonetheless terminate. Again, I believe that juxtaposing love against personhood or personal freedom may be helpful. We are not persons because there is a specific purpose we want to achieve, and if it doesn’t work, we might stop being persons. We are persons just because we want to be. Indeed, at some point we might want to cease to be—
and even do something about it—but it is not to say that, as long as we were alive, our personhood was any less absolute.

So love, in contrast to esteem, is unconditional in the sense that, as long as it is felt, there is nothing definite that the loved one could do that would deny him the lover’s love. We can now move to my claim that love is given to all features or determinations of the loved one. How does this claim square with the possibility (and indeed, actuality) of lovers’ quarrels?

When I say that love implies the affirmation of all features of the loved one, I do not mean that love approves of all features. Indeed, the lover might strongly disapprove of some of the loved one’s determinations. However, despite—or rather because—of this fact, love amounts to affirmation in two senses. First, disapproving of a given determination presupposes that the lover has certain expectations from the loved, and those, in turn, are anchored in shared, even if tacit, norms. Second, the fact that the lover disproves of certain features—even strongly disapproves of many features—but nonetheless cares about the loved one to the extent that he stays in the relationship and entertains intense feelings about these features, reflects a more basic affirmation of the loved one—affirming him as a whole person. To see what I mean, let us revisit Cavell’s passage quoted above. The loved one has done something to pain the lover. The lover disapproves, also because he feels that the loved one knew perfectly well that it would pain him. The lover’s anger, then, presupposes that they both know something, both committed to a set of shared norms—that “you and I had an understanding” as Cavell puts it. They would probably disagree about the contents of this understanding—what exactly they are
committed to, which norms—but such disagreements only reaffirm the fact that they have such an understanding. In the same vein, the lover's pain and anger shows how much he cares about the loved one over and beyond the features that he disapproves of. Indeed, this very anger is an affirmation of the loved one as a person. We are less inclined to be angry at strangers we encounter in civil society, even in our workplace. We are to respect their right to promote their interests, and if we don’t have a legal claim against them, we would do better to ignore. And if an artist we greatly appreciate and esteem proves to be stagnant and boring in her next project, we would simply deny some or all of the esteem we used to have for her. In both cases, it seems, feelings should be (ideally) avoided. That feelings—even negative feelings—are so present in loving relationships reflects profound affirmation.

Having said that, it is not clear how love—unconditional and comprehensive as I present it—supports the person in his civil society struggles. Above I discussed two ways in which the family offers such a support. In both cases it was by way of grounding the person’s life in a higher purpose—care for his family members and contributing to the life of the species. These purposes reveal the rupture marking the person’s life as serving an underlying unity, hence encourage him to continue the struggle. Love, however—at least as I presented it—can rather achieve the opposite. Granted, the loved one attains a sense of unity in his relationship with the lover, since the lover affirms him in his totality. He is one in the eyes of the other, including his faults. But, insofar as the loved one feels that this unconditional recognition is
secured, it could rather *weaken* his motivation to struggle. To counter this concern, let us visit John’s household for the last time.

John’s wife is not always satisfied with him. They have their bi weekly fights. They often disagree about the right way to deal with the children, and sometimes she claims that he brings home aggressions from the office. John feels, though, that his wife will always stick with him—not necessarily despite his faults but even because of them. They don’t make her love him any less; sometimes it seems, especially when they make peace, that the fights only enhance their love, opening venues for mutual joy and satisfaction. John feels affirmed. He comes to terms with his faults and a higher purpose is conferred on his everyday activities. It’s not to say that he does not try to correct some of his ways. He does. Yet, such changes are not experienced as conforming to an external decree of sorts—a norm enforced on John without him playing any role in the process. Rather, it is a creative process of negotiation, of balancing his perspective with that of his wife.

Based on this example, I’d like to suggest the following. The higher purpose that love offers the person is an aesthetic or creative purpose. Hegel, admittedly, doesn’t use such (or related) terms in his discussion of marriage, but the idea that one’s life is an aesthetic process, comes up in the Anthropology, where he says that the life of the fully mature individual is “the soul’s work of art [*Kunstwerk*]” (E3 §411). My suggestion is that this creative aspect of one’s life is made possible given the sort of recognition which love is. For, while respect does not motivate the respected person to any *particular* achievements, esteem motivates him to achievements in terms of a common evaluative framework—so to realize purposes
external to the esteemed person and his particular life. Only love occasions a creative process not geared towards a purpose or a norm external to the loved one. The loved one, then, can be a unique work of art in the eyes of the lover. He is thereby offered a higher purpose—an aesthetic purpose—that supports and motivates his life in civil society.

**Conclusion**

For Hegel, modern personhood—the advents of persons in civil society—is marked by rupture and struggle. I have argued that this rupture is coupled with a worldview, namely, modern skepticism. On the one hand, it entails dogmatism with respect to knowledge offered by the natural sciences. On the other hand, it implies skepticism about our ability to justify knowledge, that is, ground it in an absolute, purposive principle. There is a constant threat looming over this worldview, hence over modern personhood. Insofar as persons lack an absolute grounding—for their knowledge-claims and actions alike—their skepticism may transpire in the despair Hegel associates with nihilism. This, in a nutshell, was the key argument in the first three chapters of the dissertation.

The current, final, chapter has reconstructed some of Hegel’s remedies to this predicament. The bulk of the chapter, however, was dedicated to showing why, given the conditions of modern civil society, modern skepticism is necessary—not only in the sense that it is a hard fact of modernity, as aspect of the modern individual’s commitment to absolute independence, but also because the latter has necessary ethical functions within modern Sittlichkeit. In other words, it ought to be the case
that personal freedom is so predominant in the self-conception of modern individuals, and hence also the skepticism corresponding to it. Therefore, an ethical remedy to modern skepticism is not supposed to eliminate it but only to mitigate it.

Having said that—and keeping in mind this notion of an ethical remedy to skepticism—the sections of the chapter (Parts 1-3) that argue for the necessity of modern skepticism have also suggested remedies to it. If we bear in mind the dual nature of modern skepticism, as an unhappy yet stable hybrid of skepticism and dogmatism, arrangements that enhance this standpoint can also mitigate it. Insofar as they support the dogmatic aspect of modern skepticism—the person’s self-conception as a natural creature who immediately realizes himself in a natural world—the skeptical side is kept in check. Therefore, such arrangements serve to protect the modern person from the slipping down the slippery slope of nihilism.

If modern skepticism is coupled with the rupture and struggle that characterize the lives of persons in modern civil society, then an ethical remedy to skepticism can take two forms. The first consists in making the struggle seem both necessary and satisfying. If this works, the prospects that the individual would distance himself from the struggle and wonder about its point—hence encounter a nihilistic despair—are smaller. The argument in Parts 1-3 of the chapter has reconstructed this sort of ethical remedy.

The last section (Part 4) has reconstructed the second sort of ethical remedy. This remedy consists not in enhancing the rupture, as it were, but in showing the individual why and how the rupture is in the service of an underlying unity. This sort of skepticism, then, offers the individual grounding for his advents in civil society,
hence protects him from nihilism. In explicating this sort of ethical remedy, I have
focused on the modern family and specifically on marital love. Beyond affording the
modern person the peace and quiet required for contemplating his life in civil
society, the family offers three higher purposes—beyond the unstable motivation of
self-interest—that provide the person’s struggle in civil society with something for
the sake of which his struggle is worthwhile. Those purposes are care for his family
members, participation in the vital process of the species, and creatively fashioning
his life vis-à-vis his spouse.

This discussion, however, only offers a glimpse of the full range of ethical
remedies to skepticism that Hegel’s theory of modern Sittlichkeit embodies. My
account is partial in at least three respects. First, my focus was on the ways that the
family supports the life of the parent in civil society, while I said nothing about the
ways it prepares children for the task of independent personhood. Second, I
concentrated on the sense in which the family supports the rupture that
characterizes life in civil society, while I said nothing about no less important a
remedy if offers, namely, in tempering this rupture. For, I would argue, the different
mode of sociality that persons experience within the family should ideally have
bearing on their conduct in civil society (this issue came up in my discussion of
Hegel’s corporation, which takes the family as a model of sorts). The third respect in
which my discussion was partial concerns its focus on the family. A full account of
Hegel’s remedy to modern skepticism must give due attention to aspects of the
modern state that are germane to this problem, e.g., national identity.
This dissertation started off with a brief reflection on the meaning and challenges of modern personhood. While I hope it has demonstrated the power, necessity and theoretical implications of this peculiar image, a comprehensive account of Hegel’s concerns with modern particularity—let alone a critical assessment thereof—will have to wait for a future occasion. This final chapter, I hope, was a step in the right direction.
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