

# Newcastle University e-prints

---

**Date deposited:** 22th December 2011

**Version of file:** Author final

**Peer Review Status:** Peer reviewed

## Citation for item:

Rose DE. [The relevance of Hegel's social thought to contemporary conservatism](#). In: Ozsel, D, ed. *Reflections of Conservatism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011, pp.107-123.

## Further information on publisher website:

<http://www.c-s-p.org>

## Publisher's copyright statement:

Published with permission from Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Always use the definitive version when citing.

## Use Policy:

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not for profit purposes provided that:

- A full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- A link is made to the metadata record in Newcastle E-prints
- The full text is not changed in any way.

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

**Robinson Library, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Newcastle upon Tyne.  
NE1 7RU. Tel. 0191 222 6000**

David Edward Rose

## The relevance of Hegelian social thought to contemporary conservatism

### 1. Introduction

On ascending to the leadership of the British Labour Party, Ed Miliband (like so many political leaders before him) sought to break from the past, openly stating in several interviews that the era of New Labour was over. The posture of historical rupture is both thoroughly modern and, yet in this case, somewhat contradictory. Of course, when Miliband asserts that “New” Labour is finished, he does not mean that the party will return to “Old” Labour or even, plainly and simply, Labour, but he means a new “New” project will begin. He wishes to signal that the past—no matter how new—has been surpassed and a new, more modern project has begun. Gianni Vattimo's perceptive remark about modernity appears more and more pertinent: “... modernity is the epoch in which simply being modern became a decisive value in itself.”<sup>1</sup> What is new is always better than what is old and what is modern is preferable to what is passé just for the sake of being newer and more modern.

When a new direction is required, contemporary consciousness always intuitively looks to the new, but there is an alternative, that is the historical consciousness that seeks to continue what has been achieved and to build on and from it. The lessons of the past offer political agents guidance rather than merely mistakes and political principles emerge not from some theoretical level of a free consciousness but at a deep practical level of a situated consciousness submerged in culture. However, conservatism as a compelling political theory suffers in the contemporary milieu, at the outset, from an attitudinal disadvantage when compared to its main theoretical rivals. It is nostalgic and listens to the lessons of the past which is so utterly unmodern. And it is, for the most part, the attitude of modernity towards what is new and the idea of historical rupture which underpins most of the resistance to conservative political theory. So, one would think that if we now inhabit what has become, for better or worse, termed the postmodern age, then we would happily return to the claims of custom and the motivations of nostalgia. However, the past can be as oppressive as the drive to renew and there still rightfully exists a mistrust of custom and the authority of history which putatively supports liberal political theories at the expense of conservative ones. History is littered with oppressive regimes and ideologies that survived simply because the individual was bound (usually for the benefit of others) by the authority of some mythological past or to some false conception of his or her place

in the order of things.

Conservatism must, if it is to be intellectually relevant in the public political culture of today, be able to offer a convincing role for the individual, moral conscience. Otherwise it is all too easy to dismiss conservative thought on theoretical grounds as another form of the irrationalism or shallow relativism of postmodern rejections of liberal politics. Furthermore, conservatism would be unable to articulate a proper practical account of when the tradition and customs need to be changed and, therefore, slide into an unacceptable quietism. The following essay contends that Hegelian social thought, and above all the concept of *Sittlichkeit* can form the ground for a rational, critical conservatism. There are three tasks facing any attempt to articulate a plausible political conservatism: one, show it is possible and plausible (section 3); two, demonstrate why it is preferable to liberalism and other theories (section 4); and, three, reject the challenge of political quietism (section 5). Hegelian thought can do all three of these in the most overtly theoretical way. First, though, it would be pertinent to begin with a short section outlining a general theoretical characterization of conservative political theory with a few indications about how it coincides with Hegelian thought (section 2).<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Conservatism and Hegel's social thought

A conservative political theory ideally exhibits three characteristics: one, political scepticism; two, traditionalism; and, three, organicism. Conservative theories are sceptical of any political theory derived from abstract reasoning or ideal theories which do not make direct reference to the actual state of affairs. Reciprocally, conservative theories display an attitude of trust to the traditional and familiar and are suspicious of change. Finally, the state is conceived as an organic whole of which individuals are constituted parts: the human being is social through and through and not because of some mythological choice to cooperate with others. He or she is born into a state just as he or she is born to parents and just as parents supply a genetic code and an education, so society supplies the material and cultural possibility of human living. Any superficial reading of Hegel's political thought will be able to locate both textual and substantial evidence that supports these three aspects of his system. Moreover, the three characteristics are constants throughout the life of his political writings, from the early Jena texts (as the repercussions of the French Revolution were almost literally knocking on his door) to the mature politics of his Heidelberg and Berlin days (as he was involved in the *Realpolitik* of the educational academy).

Hegel was politically sceptical of the use of abstract reasoning since, for him, human reason is too vacuous to generate actual determinations of the will without recourse to substantial natural, social or linguistic content. Reason can tell the agent to respect others but not what constitutes such respect in the actual social

world. Knowing of that kind involves a situated subject immersed in social customs and immediate obligations. (EG §§ 506-508)<sup>3</sup> More significantly, contradictory determinations of action can seemingly be justified because human reason is powerful enough to create plural, coherent system of reasons and such contradictions can even be present within the same subject. (EG §§ 509-11; PR §140) The reason that the Owl of Minerva flies only at dusk is because the rationality of social reasons for action and political institutions is the result of an historical process and not a product of the solitary genius's mind thought up in the Ivory Tower.

Traditionalism is the positive reflection of political scepticism: where the latter eschews ahistorical thinking, the former is best characterized as faith in the familiar and customary to deliver the most commodious form of life, the most rational institutions and the best political structures. Political knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation and refined through practice and exercise. For Hegel, human action should meet the expectations of one's social peers (PR §§113-114), right claimed by the subjective conscience should be ruled by the demands of what one's social peers would find reasonable (PR §132), the political justification of institutions can only take the form of reflection on one's own, actual social world (PR pp. 9-23) and the philosophical justification of the rationality of a particular state can only be given in terms of its place in the historical narrative of self-knowledge of human reason. (EG §§548-552) So, for example, we are told that slavery is universally and morally wrong, but it is also a necessary and valid institution since only through slavery can a class become aware of its power to impose its will on the world and to consent to or negate the orders of their masters. (PR §57)

And it is clear from the above that Hegel views the individual as a product of his or her social existence and historical situation. In short, there is an intimate, organic relationship between the society and the individual. It is true for Hegel that individual subjects attain their freedom through fulfilling the roles and duties of their social stations and he shares with Burke a distrust of radical, individual thinking and its revolutionary consequences as well as proposing an account of reason that is historically situated. It is the explicit social origin of reasons which has led to the diverse interpretations of Hegel's account of the state. On the one hand, he has been accused of political quietism, in which the subject is free when he fulfils his or her social role, ruling out any possibility of protest in terms of moral conscience since to protest is to fail to fulfil one's role. And there is plenty of support for such a reading in his thought, if one concentrates on the representation of women and their roles, for example. (PR §§165-166) On the other hand, the moral conscience is held to be a fundamental and necessary attribute of individuals within the rational state and, if individuals do not possess both individuality and critical autonomy, then neither is the individual fully free nor the state fully

rational. (PR §§132, 138) Yet, overstating this supposed opposition negates a very compelling account of rational conservatism and it is that account we shall seek to reconstruct here. Hegel's concept of *Sittlichkeit* is precisely the possibility of a moral conscience and not its negation, but a moral conscience that must be historically situated in order to be both possible and effective. The very compatibility of much of Hegel's thought with liberalism often leads to the suppression of the conservative elements at the expense of closing off an alternative to the binary opposition between liberalism and conservatism.

What is more interesting than the shallow expression of these three characteristics of conservatism, is how a theory organizes their inter-relations. Political scepticism and traditionalism are two sides of the same coin, the positive and negative aspects of an attitude of trust in the current state of affairs brought about through historical processes or an attitude of mistrust of those who dissent from the *status quo* using the justification of universal reason or natural law. Attitudes, though, can neither be rational nor irrational, but they can be rationalized and replaced with knowledge, just as the veracity of beliefs can dissipate or justify one's feelings of fear. One can have trust in the doctor or not, but that attitude can be rationalized: does she hold accreditation from the relevant medical authority? Has she cured me successfully in the past? Similarly, the trust one shows in a political and social state can be rightly or wrongly invested. The advantage of liberalism is that it seems to articulate how this attitude is reliable or not: does membership of this state increase my welfare? Does it protect my basic rights? Hegelian social thought is to be lauded because, not only is it suspicious of claims of universal rights and abstract reasoning, it also offers a way for the trust to be rationalized. And it does so in a very unliberal way; it does so through making the attitudinal postures (scepticism and traditionalism) dependent on the deeper, metaphysical theory of organicism.

### 3 Organicism and moral fabric

Organicism is a social theory which, on the surface, holds that the state exists prior to the individual and that the individual is a social production. Yet, there is an implicit and deeper point here: the state and its institutions are more than instruments of social cooperation. The state of nature mythology at the heart of the social contract tradition has always seen society as a compromise or a necessary limitation of individual liberty. Hegel, like the communitarians, conservatives and socialists, believes that culture is more: it is the medium that makes possible and sustains a good. That good is not culture itself, but human freedom and human freedom is a social achievement, not an individual property.

The political scepticism and traditionalism inherent in Hegelian thought already commits it to an ideal of the situated moral subject. Objectivity is not to be found

through the reasoning of a Kantian, abstract person, but rather in the shared institutions and practices already existent in the individual's world. For Hegel, an agent has a measure of objective freedom which grants him or her the certainty of recognition: you will know me as a father if I act in such and such a way, you will know me as a lecturer due to my clothing and the books under my arms and so on. Without such practices and meanings "out there" in the social world, the agent would be unable to express his or her individuality in terms intelligible to others, nor be able to evaluate the appearance and actions of others. Without these meanings, the human being could make only the most primitive, animalistic aims intelligible to others (a point for an object of want, a cry for pain and displeasure and so on). He or she would remain bound to immediate desires as the only possible expression of liberty. The choice of which desires to pursue comes with the capacity to assign articulate value to them and this is made possible through the division of a shared culture that materially frees one from immediate desires and also culturally liberates the value of things. The substrate of meaning that makes individual action and recognition rational to others is what Hegel calls *Sittlichkeit*.

In most translations, the word *Sittlichkeit* remains in its original form with apologetic notes from the translator. Such apologies are not necessary though because there exists, in colloquial English, the term "moral fabric" which is often expressed as the "moral fabric of a culture." The agent's moral fabric supplies motivations and obligations for the agent in virtue of his membership and his role in this institutional order. It is the collection of those judgements waiting to be applied to one's appearance and actions prior even to their perception or performance. When I am at home and put my clothes on, I know what is expected from a lecturer (casual, informal), what is permissible, even if idiosyncratic (too formal, the use of "mad" bow ties) and what is unacceptable (nudity, shorts). And these judgements change with the times, but the cultural medium is—like fabric—malleable; it twists, turns, fades and is reinvigorated. One can imagine how not so long ago jeans on a lecturer would have been as unacceptable as a shellsuit is now. Similarly, moral fabric delineates the spheres of prudence and morality, of home and work, of public and private and many more. Whether one's choice to smoke is a prudential matter (concerning health), a moral matter (the welfare of others) or an aesthetic matter (concerning one's image), is dependent on the categories and priorities of one's culture. The moral fabric is, though, more: it is the material reality of one's existence (the economic and geographical facts of one's existence), the formal, political institutions and particular laws and also the embedded conventions of morality, etiquette and convention. All three aspects determine the life and goals of the individual.

And such an account of organicism reveals why a conservative is politically sceptical and also a traditionalist. Political institutions and individuals actions are not subject to the inquiry and rules of science. Political rule and human living are

both crafts and not exact science. They are more akin to the creation of works of art than the techniques of science. If I wish to write a novel, no matter how experimental or radical, it has to make reference to the narrative tradition. And if that novel is to be evaluated and judged, then it must be done so with concepts and categories drawn from the appropriate aesthetic tradition. Such criticism is not a limitation of artistic expression or an oppression of individuality, but a necessary requirement of objectivity or, if one wishes, the sense of objectivity. The canon exists as the storehouse of previous creations and acts of will that remain because they are the examples of the best that has been thought and said. The critic has trust in the canon and has learnt from the canon. But it is not closed nor fixed. It evolves and changes: new works are introduced and older ones are jettisoned. But such changes are never made on the basis of supposed abstract reasoning about what should or should not belong. Such judgements are made through an immanent conversation with the tradition rather than a transcendental appraisal of the particular work in isolation.

Moral fabric is the canon of everyday life. It is the storehouse of previous actions, projects and plans. It is the will of the past frozen into political institutions, laws and custom. The convention of shaking hands cannot be explained by some primitive causal or behavioural theory. The institution is a meaning communicating an intention in the same way a word communicates a thought. I wish to be friendly, I confer respect on you by taking your hand and I acknowledge you as my equal. One need only consider the playful way in which an adult will offer his hand to a child to enforce these meanings. The only other way to express such sentiments is to express them through language, but just as you must speak my language to understand my sentiment, so you must share my moral fabric to fully understand my gesture (for some cultures the offering of a hand to shake would be wholly alien or, worse, offensive). In this sense, *Sittlichkeit* is a “second nature”, the world is constituted by social rather than natural reasons for action. (PR §151) And the substrate of a social context and a moral fabric allows the individual to enjoy life without being enslaved to satisfying the necessity of immediate desires such as preservation, hunger and thirst. Moreover, the agent's freedom is further increased by overcoming his egoism through the recognition of increasing spheres of solidarity to others: family members, workers, communities and species. Finally, the moral fabric allows the agent to express him or herself as an individual without having to include instructions on how he or she should be understood: my bow tie is an expression of my wackiness and desire not to be conventional even if I admire the virtue of formality.

Consequently, the subject as a member of this order has an identity which motivates him in certain situations:

... subjective *freedom* exists as the covertly and overtly *universal* rational will, which is sensible of itself and actively disposed in the consciousness of the individual subject, whilst its practical operation and immediate universal *actuality* at the same time exist as moral usage, manner and custom where self-conscious *liberty* has become *nature*. (EG §513)

The substantial identity of the individual agent supplies immediate motivations in social situations that are trustworthy and his natural way of acting has been augmented and transformed by a social way of acting. This is a liberation: acting free of immediate desire and becoming an individual through the medium of social convention. Central to the issue is the idea that making liberty into nature reveals that it is not a property that humans possess, but rather a project to be achieved. Just as the canon supplies the standards of aesthetic judgement that are trustworthy (and a budding artist must at first imitate the tradition before expressing his or her individuality), so political institutions, social meanings and moral values of a culture supply the standards of judgement for everyday life that are trustworthy. The subject has “trust” in the objective social order and its rationality in the same way that I trust it will rain when I see grey clouds, I personally cannot explain the science behind the prediction nor would the science be watertight if I could (and I shall not tear up my theory if it happens to fail to rain), but I can base my actions on it because it is a reliable judgement transmitted from the past. (EG §525, PR §147) The moral fabric is both the objective social order embedded in institutions and also the substantial identity of the agent as a member of these institutions.

The structures of a social, moral fabric make possible the satisfaction of rational desires, projects and aspirations much like the aesthetic canon makes possible the appreciation of works of art and an articulation of their worth. The liberal conscience, similarly, is only possible given the right set of historical conditions. But its justification is only possible as an historical narrative, not an empirical or a priori given. Or so the next section will demonstrate.

#### 4 History and justification

So far, it has been shown that a conservative political theory is possible and plausible in that organicism can account for political obligations and there is empirical, psychological support for assuming that an agent's culture supplies motivations that determine his or her axiological framework and system of needs. It remains to be shown that, as a system of justification, it is preferable to liberalism and that it can resist the challenge of quietism. In fact, it is superficially at a disadvantage since liberalism has a mode for rationalizing trust in custom and authority but does so at the expense of tradition in favour of transcendental standards of right. That conservative theory is suspicious of such abstract reasoning is a moot point unless it can offer a preferable alternative to the justification of the

values used in practical reasoning. The reasons why the Hegelian justification of the values of contemporary culture is preferable to liberalism is two-fold: one, that the moral conscience is supported by and integral to the most rational form of political culture and, two, a consideration of the metaphysical status of moral statements.

If a political institution is proposed as just, then it is immediately measured against the shared intuitions of a culture. So, democracy is justified because it is the best expression of personal, individual autonomy and everyone would agree that personal autonomy is something that is worth maintaining and promoting. But, if asked why personal autonomy is so important or more important than, say, social order or the protection of public property, the conservative would simply answer because it is something that this culture happens to value. The liberal, on the other hand, would be able to adopt a position of moral realism (it is true that autonomy is a good), indirect utilitarianism (general welfare is best maximized by the promotion of autonomy) or proceduralism (autonomy is one of those things that an agent in a position of impartiality would agree is universal). In short, the liberal (of whatever ilk) is able to justify through the use of standards independent of the culture itself, not just because we as a culture happen to think they are worthwhile values. And that means in cases when a group is persecuted or a minority is denied equal treatment according to values upheld by a particular culture, liberalism can describe it as a bad culture whereas conservatism, seemingly, cannot.

Hegelian conservatism differs from the simple form of conservatism in that it is not the case (as one feels Oakeshott, Walzer and Croce would hold) that the values of liberalism just happen to be the values of our culture. For Hegel, it is not just that we can trust the moral fabric of modern, Western culture, but that such a moral fabric is better than others because it does support autonomy and equality. And a culture that supports freedom and equality is better than other cultures because not only can the individual act on motivations that are liberating but he or she can reflect on such reasons and appropriate them as his or her own. The storehouse of values and conventions in modern culture are different from those of other cultures because these values remain reflective even if they are not reflected upon. This difference is probably best illustrated by Hegel's own distinction between reflective (the state) and unreflective trust (the family).

When a mother sees her child's life is in danger, she unreflectively sacrifices her own safety in order to protect the child. To do so is human and naturally so. Reflection on such an altruistic (and the adjective itself is tellingly somewhat inappropriate) action would not reveal any deeper, rationally structured reason. Why do we protect our children or, less rhetorically, satisfy their material needs? Simply because that is what one does. And one naturally does it. Social motivations can be as unreflective as these natural ones. So, for example, my support of the Aston Villa football team motivates certain behaviour and is the

ground of many attitudes and emotions, but it cannot meet the demands of any rationality. Why do I support Aston Villa? Just because I do, but that support constitutes a substantial part of my identity. There exist explanations of why I support Aston Villa, based on particular, social and geographical luck: my place of birth, my first football match, the first kit bought for me and so on, and those contingent facts bear on my identity. Trust in my family members is equally unreflective: I trust them just because they are my family members. There is no real reason to articulate.

The reflective trust in the state, however, is open to scrutiny unlike that of the family because of its rational structure. Many social motivations can be reflected upon because they can be articulated and shared. The convention of wearing a helmet when one cycles is prudential and based in good reason, yet children are indoctrinated into such a practice through peer pressure and the use of desirable cartoon characters adorned on the objects due to economic aims. The children trust that such a convention is rational in the same way they trust their parents with other decisions. The children want, and immediately so, what they should rationally want and it is this reconciliation through moral fabric of what the individual wants and what he or she should want that is the very making of liberty into nature.

It is perfectly sensible to demand a justification of a particular law, social duty or more and why I should act in accordance with it. The point is, agents rarely do demand justification and as such express a reflective trust in their state which is just to say, its laws and institutions are open to legitimation and the state must make the scrutiny by the agent possible. However, what differs between modern, liberal culture and, for example, Ancient Greek or Roman culture, is that for the first time the organic relation between the individual and the state is a reflective rather than an unreflective one. Other cultures, those without autonomy and equality, are more akin to the motivations of a football fan and even if their legal structures are rational, the agent is unable to be aware of their rationality. As such, there can be no reconciliation of what I want and what I should want, even if the two may well be identical due to simple social luck. The difference between the hero and the normal person may well be the moral luck of happening to be in the presence of a burning orphanage. Similarly, the difference between the partially free human and the fully free human may well happen to be being born in the right culture. Autonomy and equality are the values, substantiated in specific institutions and social structures as well as being revered by the consciousness of the community, which make possible and promote the reflective attitude which is necessary for the recognition and appropriation of the motivations of my moral fabric as my own. The appropriation of these motivations of my own is the replacement of a natural identity with a social one which is, as Hegel tells us, self-conscious liberty. And this can only happen within a liberal culture.

So, like liberalism, Hegelian conservatism is able to assert that some cultures (precisely those which make possible the individual reflection and appropriation of social motivations as one's own) are better than others and that the values of our culture are not ones we just happen to possess, but ones that are justified above those of other cultures. Moreover, Hegelian conservatism, unlike liberalism, does not assume such values can be derived by abstract reason, but only through the processes of history and then be known to the consciousnesses of individuals who reflect on their culture. It is disingenuous to "transcendentally" assert that all freedom requires is political institutions which support autonomy and equality because only when history has produced those institutions which reconcile wants and duties in reflective trust can one become aware of the formal conditions of free existence. To illustrate this, imagine choosing to build a house. The choice of materials, direction and plan of the building, the height of ceilings and type of roof could be chosen arbitrarily and spontaneously, but to do so is to run the risk of constructing something that is unliveable. The needs and demands of the geographical location and its climate and the responses to such demands are "stored" in the buildings that surround one. The past knowledge is transmitted through the existence of actual houses and such knowledge can be trusted and imitated. Yet, science can be used to justify certain techniques: large windows let in too much light, certain stone will retain heat better and new technologies can change practices (central heating, for example). The trust is reflective because there exists the possibility to apply reason to custom, but reason cannot a priori think up the rules for building, the tradition reveals what is to be tested. The best culture is the one in which reason can be applied to the actual structures and laws in order to justify one's trust.

And by relocating the liberal/conservative opposition to the problem of justification, it becomes apparent that the opposition rests upon a very simple dichotomy in political thought: Kantianism versus Hegelianism.<sup>4</sup> The liberal or Kantian tradition appeals to standards that are universal, ahistorical and objective, it does not matter who you are and where or when you live because there exist moral rights which are applicable always, to everyone and everywhere. And such universalism is as characteristic of proceduralism and utilitarianism as it is of liberal realism: what matters or has value is known a priori and is universal. Alternatively, Hegelian theories hold that the categories and values of morality are derived from historical and social contexts. There is no view from nowhere from which to justify one tradition over another and no appeal to human value beyond the communities that confer on it a meaning. The reconciliation of liberalism and conservatism occurs with the recognition that the liberal programme is a tradition like all others and a rational one, but within limits. It is worthwhile to keep the political institutions, but to drop the pretence of universality and objectivity. Yet, such a reconciliation still suffers against a full-blooded liberalism when we

consider cases such as the persecution of a minority and the call for universal suffrage; like Hegel's comments on slavery, it is distasteful to describe unfair distribution of rights and the exclusion of women from political participation as valid in the world where it occurs. We intuitively want more bite from our political theories and so conservatism has to offer more.

The consideration of history as the ground for justification requires a deeper reflection, though. Hegel has a metaphysical account of history which justifies the evolution and rationality of a particular moral fabric. Some cultures are better than others, but such a judgement cannot be reduced to the mere, formal values of liberalism. Why might a conservative want to trust in history? One reason is that there is no alternative; that political scepticism leaves no choice but that means that the values we possess just happen to be the ones we use in justification. Hegelian conservatism has to demonstrate that the historical justification of these values is preferable to the liberal justifications: moral realism, utilitarianism and proceduralism.

History can justify the values of liberalism by assuming that liberal states are the end of history and history is the process that sorts the wheat from the chaff of political values and social meanings. Such a faith in progress can be empirically evidenced in the medical sciences, but it is harder to defend in political science especially since the justifications of progress are often value-laden. Whereas a liberal is committed to the moral realism of values or, in a more Kantian ilk, committed to the universality of values, Hegel eschews both for an historical account of truth. His account of history is metaphysical and has to do with the nature of moral truth: history is the self-actualization of truth. How is one to understand this?

The simplest form of liberalism is a moral realism. Such a position would hold that the statement "autonomy is valuable" is true in the same way "snow is white" is true in that it corresponds to the way things actually are. Although one may be willing to entertain that words can stand in for natural facts, it is hard to understand what must or must not be for a word to stand in for a normative value. In the first case, there is at least a causal story to be told about the interaction between perceptual faculties and the world. The moral realist may want to claim that there is a special moral faculty that allows individuals to intuit true moral values (akin to a mathematical faculty), but they then have to explain the phenomenon of moral pluralism. Real values are metaphysically puzzling and moral diversity amongst societies is, at least superficially, better explained by a theory consistent with Hegelian conservatism and its idea of moral fabric.

For this reason, most liberals would look for a coherentist account of truth: "autonomy is valuable" is true if all rational beings would agree to the statement. A movement, if one likes, from correspondence to intersubjectivity. Hegel, like Kant's idealism, moves away from realism to the idea of consensus of rational

beings: a value is true if it is a value all agents would hold, at all times and in all places. This is equally true for both the utilitarian and the proceduralist liberal: there is one moral truth (welfare is good) to which all agents would agree, and political laws must cohere with this standard. The proceduralist, who assumes that agreement is a regulative ideal of all moral discourse, is liberal because agreement will be universal and not bounded. Yet, whereas for Kant reason is ahistorical and universal, Hegel believes that for knowledge to have substantial content and not just formal characteristics, then it must express an historical content. Universality gives us only abstract shapes, no substance. In what does welfare substantially consist? What actually matters to the agent? And what factors are worthy to be discussed at the negotiating table? All these questions require substantial answers discoverable only through bringing one's comprehensive and full moral identity into discussions, not just an abstract identity in order to compel universal agreement.

Metaphysically history is the home of truth and the unfolding of political and moral progress for Hegel because it is the arena in which the rational demands can be answered because the actual requirements have been worked out and transmitted from the previous generation. In liberal, Western democracies, such transmission is no longer socially lucky because once the values of autonomy and equality are institutionally in place, the agent's trust becomes reflective and not just immediate. When the jury convicts a criminal because they did not like the look in his eyes and he was actually guilty, they do so luckily: their knowledge is lucky (it is a mere true, belief). They just happen to have hit on the truth. Only if they had proper reasons (evidence, character insights and so on) would their judgement be rational. Similarly, if a culture just happens upon better values than an other, its members are socially lucky. Only when the members have reasons for supporting those values, are those values actually justified. But rationality comes after the institutions are already embedded (like the principles of building follow the tradition of building). Since liberal communities, because they embed the values of autonomy, equality and respect, are best placed to understand other cultures and their own, and to express what needs to be improved, in a way other cultures cannot then they are the end of an historical process towards the achievement of human freedom. Hegelian conservatism offers an historical justification of liberal values that holds them above the values of other cultures, but is aware of the fact that they cannot be thought up at an abstract level without history having run its course.

## 5 Conservatism and quietism

Hegelian conservatism is a plausible theory that, at the justificatory level, is preferable to liberalism because it does not rely on intuitionism or metaphysically

puzzling accounts of value. It is plausible as an account of political theory both psychological (as a description of why agents act the way they do and why political society is structured the way it is). It can, like liberalism, also normatively compare cultures against each other and, it is preferable to liberalism as a theory, because the basis of such cultural evaluation does not seem to be circular: the best culture is the one which endorses Western values because we do. Rather Western values are historically justified because they make possible and sustain human freedom, though what human freedom requires cannot be known by a priori reasoning nor natural law. For this reason, Hegelian conservatism also avoids the appearance of oppression that accompanies liberalism when it applies these values to other cultures.

However, although the theory may well be theoretically plausible, it still suffers from one major, practical disadvantage. It cannot apparently resist the accusation of political quietism laid at the door of most conservative theories. To illustrate what is at stake let us use a rather relevant example, at least within the domain of Hegel's own writings. Let us consider the issue of suffrage and the rights of women to possess a vote. In contemporary political discourse, it would be absurd to exclude a group from political participation due to an arbitrary and irrelevant characteristic. So, biological difference does not have the same significance as mental age when considering whether an individual should have the right to vote. Grounding our reasoning are a host of intuitions and moral categories that justify our beliefs: equality, autonomy, freedom to expression and so on. Mental age impairs reason and those below a certain threshold are subject to influence and their interests are better protected by proxy through parental decisions. The conservative says that these reasons have been transmitted from previous generations and developed through historical process and should therefore determine our thinking on this issue.

Of course, the point is that one hundred years ago the same sort of arguments concerning children would have been offered to justify the exclusion of women from political participation: they are too emotional to rely on reason, they will be unduly influenced and their interests are better protected through head of household decisions. Such attitudes were equally the product of historical processes and were transmitted from previous generations. The liberal would be able to indicate universal rights and values, such as equality and the right to property, that will be violated by the exclusion of women from political participation. Conservatism needs to show that it has a place for an effective individual moral conscience.

To a certain extent, the Hegelian response is expected and has already been outlined in the preceding paragraphs. If I support a football team, the customs of behaviour I inherit—both general and particular—are mere luck, there is nothing about them that is my own, nor could there be. However, the obligations and duties

of my culture are different because they rely on reflective trust: there can exist rational structures that support them. For a relationship of reflective trust to exist, those rational structures must be accessible to me as an individual and possible of articulation as reasons that all members of our culture should share. In other words, there ought to exist the individual moral conscience and this is to be supported and maintained by a fully rational moral fabric. Otherwise, individuals are not free.

The example in point confirms this. The right to vote is one way for me to reconcile what I want with what I should want. Only through participating in political process and expressing myself in the formation of laws, can I truly feel they are my laws. How one is to be reconciled with law in this sense is particular to a community, but one which espouses democracy implicitly holds that individuals must be responsible for their own laws. Women were not and so, even if the laws of society were fair and just, they just happened to be for these agents and were not rationally so. Hegelian conservatism, with its commitment to reflective organicism, requires that all individuals have access to the rational structures of culture. And that reflection takes the form of a conscience that can, when called upon, question the structures and values of a community. Political quietism is the face of political wrongs is, therefore, contrary to the very movement of history required by cultural transmission.

## 6 Conclusion

Political and philosophical discourse revels in offering binary oppositions in order to clarify difficult discussions and to delineate the landscape of discourse. Such binary oppositions do as much damage as good though; they obscure or misinterpret the more subtle understanding of what actually is at stake. The opposition between conservatism and liberalism is not a simple either/or and it is one merit of Hegelian social thought that it brings this reflection to the surface. Hegel is not best understood as a liberal or a conservative and no thinker worth his or her salt fits neatly into the predesignated categories of simple thinking. The opposition is not even an opposition, but more a “polysition” between liberalism, libertarianism, socialism, communitarianism and so on. To concentrate on two of these terms is again a misconstrual of what is at stake. Hegelian thought reminds contemporary theorists of their own oversimplifications, but also offers a very plausible account of liberal conservatism or conservative liberalism; that is the reconciliation between liberal society and its historical emergence.

---

<sup>1</sup> G. Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, trans. D. Webb (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992), p.1.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term “Hegelian” rather than make reference to Hegel directly for reasons of economy. The choice for the essay was between a work in the history of thought that seeks to address the relocation of Hegel into the comfortable sphere of liberalism or to offer a substantial account of a robust conservative political theory derived from Hegel's thinking

---

and the concept of *Sittlichkeit*. The former would be intricate and full of historical commentary and quotations interesting, for the most part, to Hegelian scholars. The debate can be begun by looking at F. Cristi, "Hegel's conservative liberalism", *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 22:4 (1989), pp. 717-738, P. Franco, "Hegel and liberalism", *The Review of Politics*, vol. 59:4 (1997), pp. 831-860 and G. Kelly, "Politics and philosophy in Hegel", *Polity*, vol. 9:1 (1976), pp. 3-18. The latter is, hopefully, of wider interest, but requires trust in the author that what he presents as Hegelian is consistent with Hegel. The author believes it is.

<sup>3</sup> Given my overt aim to present an Hegelian account, I shall attempt to keep references to a minimum and indicate only when I feel the reader may wish to delve further into a specific claim. For this reason, the works of Hegel are limited to his mature thought and abbreviations to are as follows:

EG: *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind, Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. W. Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

PR: *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. Nisbet (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> R. Rorty, "Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism", *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 80 (10), pp. 583-589.