

RACISM AND RATIONALITY IN HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY OF SUBJECTIVE SPIRIT

Darrel Moellendorf

The eurocentrism of Hegel's philosophy of history is well known. Hegel's reputation has not benefited from many of the claims in the *Philosophy of History*; such as the one that African history, having no development, has contributed nothing to world history.¹ Because of the general lack of attention that Hegel's philosophy of subjective spirit has received, it is little known that this eurocentrism is based, in part, on the racism of the philosophy of subjective spirit. Only here does Hegel systematically treat the biological category of race. Reading through this section one can find passages about racial distinctions which seem initially to be rather ambivalent, but taken as a whole are decidedly racist. Much of what Hegel says about the 'inferiority' of African culture and the 'justification' for the slave trade finds its foundation here. This paper is an exhibition of the relevant passages of the 'Philosophy of Subjective Spirit' and an attempt to link them to Hegel's other claims about African culture and the slave trade. I will argue that Hegel's philosophy of spirit is tainted by the unusual (for Hegel) causal role which he gives to a biological category, namely race. I will argue further that his philosophy of spirit is not necessarily racist, only contingently so, that is that his racism does not follow from any of his fundamental claims about spirit. Hegel's account of spirit makes his racism possible, not necessary. The source of his racism can be traced to the general ideology of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, understanding how Hegel could hold racist views is important for understanding features of his political philosophy. It shows both the problems of the Hegelian conception of person-

¹ *PH* 99. All references which are comprised solely of numbers refer to sections of Hegel's *Encyclopedia*. If an 'r' follows a number, then the passage cited is in the remarks to the paragraph written by Hegel. If an 'a' follows a number, then the passage is in the addition that follows the paragraph, the additions are composed of notes gathered by his students. In the case of the *Philosophy of Spirit*, the notes were gathered by Boumann. I have found it necessary at times to refer to these notes in order to understand Hegel. Such a method has its obvious disadvantages. In addition to the *Encyclopedia*, the *Philosophy of Right* and the *Philosophy of History* are cited, and are referred to in parentheses as 'PR' and 'PH' respectively, followed by the section number of PR and the page number of the English translation of PH. I have relied on the Petry translations and compilation of the German texts of the *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, Vols. 1–3 (Dordrecht and Boston, 1978), the Knox translation of the *Philosophy of Right* (Oxford, 1967), the Wallace translation of the encyclopedia *Logic* (Oxford, 1982), and the Sibree translation of the *Philosophy of History* (New York, 1956). Changes in translation have been to replace capitalized letters which begin certain key terms of Hegel's vocabulary with lower case letters, since the German does not make this distinction and it often serves to make Hegel seem all the more mysterious. Any other changes are indicated as my translations. All emphasis is contained in the original unless otherwise noted.

hood and exemplifies the conservative bias built into his method of political philosophy generally.

The question of whether or not the human species can be divided into various races is a matter of biology. It takes on social significance, however, when economic, social and political goods and ills, benefits and burdens, are distributed unequally between the various races. I understand the term ‘racist’ to apply to those social systems, institutions and practices which encourage or maintain the above-mentioned inequalities. The views which seek to justify such racist systems, institutions and practices are called racist views.² The standard method by which these views are supported is to claim that biological differences entail significant psychological differences which warrant different (and of course unequal) social treatment. In systems where social roles are used to distribute the goods and ills, benefits and burdens of society unequally, natural racial differences are often said to justify different social role assignments. In the nineteenth century, slavery and racist colonial policies were often ‘justified’ in this fashion.³

The key to such arguments is obviously the association of the biological with the psychological or moral and the social. There are three places in Hegel’s philosophy of subjective spirit which taken together commit him to such an association. These are the additions to paragraphs 393 and 435, and the remark to paragraph 482 of the *Encyclopedia*.⁴

Before examining the relevant passages, though, it is worth remembering that there is a liberal side to Hegel’s political philosophy. The goal of social and political actions, and of institutions such as the state, is the realization of liberty.⁵ The purpose of the state is to preserve right;⁶ to this end laws are instituted.⁷ It is because citizens are compelled to follow the law that Hegel says freedom

² cf. Kwame Anthony Appiah, ‘Racisms’, *Anatomy of Racism* (Minneapolis, 1990), pp. 3–17. In order to distinguish several different types of racism Appiah refers to the sort that I discuss as extrinsic racism. I will preserve the more general term ‘racism’ since I am not concerned to distinguish among types.

³ ‘Now, slavery based, for example, on biblical stories about tainted inheritance have had a long history. But modern racism is something different, a more viciously systematic conception of inherent and *natural* inferiority, which took off in the late 17th or early 18th century and culminated in the 19th century when it acquired the pseudo-scientific reinforcement of *biological* theories of race, and continued to serve as an ideological support for colonial oppression even after the abolition of slavery’. Ellen Meiksins Wood, ‘Capitalism and Human Emancipation’, *New Left Review*, 167 (January/February 1988), p. 7.

⁴ Admittedly, one must be cautious in judging the first two pieces as evidence of the views of Hegel because they were not written by him, but were gathered from his lectures by his student Michelet. But the questions about the reliability of these notes tend usually to address not so much their content as their form.

⁵ 484, *PR* 27.

⁶ *PR* 29.

⁷ 485.

takes the form of necessity.⁸ But the necessity loses its hard edge when the laws are rational, when they preserve rights and apply universally. A person whose will conforms to such laws has a will which conforms to the universal will.⁹ Because the basis of law is to preserve right, individual liberty is preserved even in the act of conforming to laws. Furthermore, Hegel believes the value of personal subjectivity or particular personality to be constitutive of the modern outlook.¹⁰

There is clearly no theoretical basis in all of this to justify the unequal treatment of members of different races. Indeed, initially in the addition to paragraph 393, Hegel seems to come out against such inequalities:

Descent provides no basis upon which to create a justification or invalidation of the freedom or supremacy of a people. Human beings are implicitly rational; therein lies the possibility of equal rights for all people and the nullification of any rigid distinction between members of the human species who possess rights and those who do not. (My translation.)

This statement is consistent with Hegel's emphasis on equality under the law. It may be an attack on noble privilege but, in the context, would appear to be an attack on racism as well.

However, Hegel holds that the biological distinctions which exist among the races are part of the rational scheme of things. Immediately following the quotation above the claim is made that racial distinctions, being natural distinctions, are seated in the natural soul. Hegel maintains that the natural soul is that biological moment of the soul which is determined by its natural surroundings.¹¹ The surroundings which produce racial distinctions are the geographical differences of the continents. These latter differences Hegel holds to be necessary,¹² and so, by implication, therefore rational.¹³

⁸ 484.

⁹ 485, *PR* 29r.

¹⁰ 147a, 482, *PR* 46r, *PR* 206. None of this is intended to support the view that Hegel was an unqualified liberal. He clearly holds some positions that liberals would find unsatisfactory. For example, he does not believe that there is a clear and rational line of demarcation beyond which a state may not interfere in the lives of its citizens (*PR* 234). For an account of how this fits into Hegel's overall political philosophy see Allen Wood's *Hegel's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 258–9.

¹¹ 391.

¹² 393a.

¹³ This inference does not depend upon the spurious claim that Hegel believed that everything which exists is rational; rather it depends upon a premise to the effect that what necessarily exists is rational. There is plenty of textual evidence that Hegel believed something like this. He is well known for claiming that what is actual is rational (cf. the preface to the *Philosophy Of Right*, and paragraph 6 of the 1830 *Encyclopedia*). There are also sound textual reasons for equating 'actual' with 'necessarily existing'. 'Developed actuality, as the coincident alternation of inner and outer, the alternation of their opposite motions combined into a single motion is necessity' (147); and, 'Genuine actuality is necessity; what is actual is inherently necessary' (*PR* 270a). So, for Hegel, what necessarily exists is actual, and what is actual is rational.

The view that natural, racial distinctions are necessary and rational would be relatively benign if nothing more were made of it. But there are sound textual reasons to believe that Hegel did make much more of it. Initially what is at stake appears to be merely a matter of aesthetics without moral significance. The lecture notes recorded in 1825 by two of Hegel's students, Kehler and Griesheim,¹⁴ indicate that Hegel made the following rather contradictory statement:

No colour has any superiority, it being merely a matter of being accustomed to it, although one can speak of the objective superiority of the Caucasian race as against that of the Negro. Caucasians, Georgians etc. are descended from the Turks and the finest types are to be found among these people. The finest colour is that in which what is internal is most visible, the colour which is determined from within outwards in an animal manner . . . It is the condition of the interior, the animal and spiritual interior, making itself more visible which is the objective superiority of the white skin colour.¹⁵

With this aesthetic judgment Hegel first treads onto the slippery slope of racial distinctions.¹⁶ Where such a distinction is made, it would seem that the moral distinction is quick to follow.

Since Hegel places this discussion of biological differences within the context of the natural soul, and the soul is not a separate immaterial entity¹⁷ but possesses the same determinations as natural objects,¹⁸ it is no great leap to claim that there are spiritual or psychological differences among races which are determined by these natural or biological differences. Hegel spares no words: 'Negroes, uninterested and lacking in interest, in a state of undisturbed naivety, are to be regarded as a nation of children. They are sold and allow themselves to be sold without any reflection as to the rights or wrongs of it.'¹⁹

The facts of the matter, as we know well, are dramatically different. Historians inform us that this 'nation of children' had a rather complex set of institutions and practices.²⁰ African society was not however a fully developed

¹⁴ For further information about the Kehler and Griesheim manuscripts see *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, Vol. 1, trans. Michael John Petry (Dordrecht and Boston, 1978), pp. cxiii–cxiv.

¹⁵ *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, Vol. 2, trans. M.J. Petry (Dordrecht and Boston, 1978), p. 46. My translation.

¹⁶ This sort of aesthetic distinction is referred to as 'scientific' racist logic by Cornel West in 'Race and Social Theory: Towards a Geneological Materialist Analysis', in *The Year Left 2*, ed. Davis *et al.* (London, 1987), p. 88.

¹⁷ 389.

¹⁸ 391a.

¹⁹ 393a.

²⁰ cf. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington DC, 1974), pp. 33–71. Rodney contends that African society contained a complex system of rights and obligations. He also cites evidence of the respect that early Dutch explorers had for the society that they saw. Cf. also Basil Davidson, *The African Slave Trade* (Boston and Toronto, 1961). Davidson characterizes

feudal society, and because of this it did not possess an armed ruling class. As a result, a significant inferiority of the Africans was in their fire-power. However, if the Africans had simply allowed themselves to be sold, the European trader's shackles, cages, whips and guns would hardly have been necessary.

An obvious apology for Hegel's position would be to claim that he simply did not know of the struggles and achievements of Africans, that this knowledge is the result of later historiography. The difficulty with this position is that Hegel most surely was aware of both the resistance on the part of slaves and of their achievements. He demonstrates knowledge of the massive slave uprising in Haiti, inspired by the same principles of the French revolution which he held so dear:

They [Blacks] cannot be said to be ineducable, for not only have they occasionally received Christianity with the greatest thankfulness and spoke movingly of the freedom they have gained from it after prolonged spiritual servitude, but in Haiti they have even formed a state on Christian principles.²¹

It is surprising that Hegel could have been aware of this tremendous struggle and nonetheless have held to a view of the natural docility of blacks. Here is how C.L.R. James, a historian of the Haitian revolt, describes it:

In August 1791, after two years of the French Revolution and its repercussions in San Domingo, the slaves revolted. The struggle lasted for 12 years. The slaves defeated in turn the local whites and the soldiers of the French monarchy, a Spanish invasion, a British expedition of some 60,000 men, and a French expedition of similar size under Bonaparte's brother-in-law. The defeat of Bonaparte's expedition in 1803 resulted in the establishment of the Negro state of Haiti which has lasted to this day. The revolt is the only successful slave revolt in history . . .²²

If Hegel is making a historical generalization, it is clearly contrary to facts of which he was well aware.

It is not just blacks who Hegel deems psychologically inferior. Asians from Mongolia, Tibet, India and China are criticized because their religious practices are deemed to be unworthy of free persons. American Indians are seen as a feeble race, as if they were themselves responsible for their own slaughter.²³ Since the context is a discussion of natural racial differences, Hegel must be

pre-colonial African society as a mixture of feudalism and tribalism. One of the most significant differences between European feudalism and African society, he contends, is that the leaders of the latter were not armed.

²¹ 393a.

²² C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York, 1963), p. ix.

²³ 393a.

understood as claiming that the cause of the ‘inferiority’ of these peoples is racial, not cultural; the influence of necessary and rational biological differences upon the psyche. It is in the soul, Hegel claims, that spirit finds the raw material for its character;²⁴ and when he opens the discussion of objective spirit, the realm of culture, the influence of natural, anthropological differences upon the free will is still recognized.²⁵

If the non-white peoples are seen by Hegel to be variously weak, unfit for freedom and irrational *because* of their biology, the Europeans or whites are seen as the very paradigm of freedom and rationality. Two passages from the addition to paragraph 393 suffice to show this:

It is in the *Caucasian* race that spirit first reaches absolute unity with itself. It is here that it first enters into complete opposition to naturality, apprehends itself in its absolute independence, disengages from the dispersive vacillation between one extreme and the other, achieves self-determination, self-development, and so brings forth world history.²⁶

It is, the concrete universal, self-determining thought, which constitutes the principle and character of *Europeans*.²⁷

Thus far Hegel appears committed to the following: (1) natural or biological racial distinctions are necessary and part of the rational scheme of things; (2) associated with the biological differences among races are psychological and spiritual differences; and (3) the character of these psychological or spiritual differences is that whites are free and rational and other races are not. In these paragraphs Hegel does not recommend that, given this ‘natural’ state of affairs, the best socio-political order would be a qualified form of liberalism for whites and despotism or paternalism for other races; but one could, without much effort, infer this.

A tacit justification of slavery for non-whites can be seen in the combination of two other passages. The first claims that, ‘[w]hole continents, Africa and the Orient, have never had this idea [the idea of freedom] and are still without it’.²⁸ In the second is the moral judgment. ‘No absolute injustice is done to those who remain servants, for whoever lacks the courage to risk his life in order to obtain freedom deserves to remain a slave.’²⁹ The claim that slavery isn’t an absolute

²⁴ 389.

²⁵ 483. As with the ‘Natural Soul’, when Hegel speaks of the ‘natural condition’ of Africans it is their biologically determined behaviour to which he refers. ‘The doctrine which we deduce from this condition of slavery among the Negroes, and which constitutes the only side of the question that has an interest for our inquiry, is that which we deduce from the idea: viz. that the “natural condition” itself is one of absolute and thorough injustice — contravention of the right and just.’ (PH 98–9.)

²⁶ 393a.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ 482r.

²⁹ 435a.

injustice is echoed in the remark to paragraph 57 of the *Philosophy of Right*. It might appear that we are to think of the Africans captured and sold into slavery as merely lacking courage. Actually, Hegel's position is less simplistic than that, but no less troublesome.

Hegel's racism is not contradictory to his more general theoretical views, nor does it follow necessarily from them, rather it is compatible with them. Spirit is the completion of Hegel's system, the third of three fundamental moments of reality: logic or the laws of thought, nature and spirit. Spirit is the realm of freedom,³⁰ the activity of overcoming nature³¹ which is governed by causal necessity.³² This overcoming of nature is a continual process which happens at all levels of spirit whether it be in the activity of cognition, the institutions of society, or achievements of art and philosophy. Nature is never finally overcome once and for all; spirit is not a finished product. Rather, spiritual freedom involves constantly overcoming natural necessity.³³ The breakdown of spirit's activity and the incursion of natural forces is always a possibility. This explains limitations of various kinds to spiritual activity and the ways in which such activity can degenerate. Mental illness is an example of the latter.³⁴ Unless the activity of spirit is able to achieve and maintain control over natural forces there will be neither freedom nor rationality.

On this account then it is perfectly possible that people could degenerate into irrationality or become slaves to biological forces. One may count it as a strong point of Hegel's view that he can give an account of such phenomena. In this regard Hegel's account has certain advantages over Kant's transcendental psychology, which cannot explain the unity or disunity of transcendental ego. The trouble, of course, is that Hegel sees such inferior psychic conditions as applying with rational necessity to those who are not white. Theoretically the source of this trouble lies in Hegel's account of the natural soul. It is non-controversial to maintain that at least some aspects of human behaviour are determined by their natural surroundings. Hegel, however, extends these natural behavioural determinants to the geography of the race's origin and the colour of that race's skin.³⁵ These two natural properties are held to be so forceful as to inhibit personhood.

Only those who have successfully won recognition from others can be counted as persons. Thus, Hegel contends that mutual recognition is the basis for the spiritual relations which constitute the family, country and state and the virtues of love and friendship.³⁶ For Hegel, slavery is no absolute injustice because slaves have quite literally lost the struggle for recognition, a struggle which blacks were fated to lose because of their biology. 'For it is the essential principle of slavery, that man has not yet attained a consciousness of his

³⁰ 382.

³¹ 381.

³² 248.

³³ 382a.

³⁴ 408.

³⁵ 393.

³⁶ 436r.

freedom, and consequently sinks down to a mere thing — an object of no value.³⁷ In the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel distinguishes between persons and things.³⁸ Persons, being free, are ends in themselves;³⁹ things, on the other hand, embody the will of persons. One is not free until one's will takes possession of one's body,⁴⁰ this amounts to being recognized as free by others. 'Only through struggle, therefore, can freedom be won; the assurance that one is free does not suffice to make one so; one demonstrates one's capacity for freedom, from this standpoint, only by placing oneself and others in mortal danger.'⁴¹ Slaves have not won recognition, and therefore do not embody their own will but the will of the master. On Hegel's view, being rational or potentially free is not enough to be granted the moral status of personhood; one is not a person until one courageously becomes one factually, that is, until one has won freedom.

The Hegelian concept of personhood differs in important ways from the Kantian. For Kant respect for persons is warranted because persons have the potential for autonomy, for rational action resulting from the self-legislating will.⁴² Now, for Kant it is quite impossible to know whether a person is ever acting autonomously, for any act in conformity with the moral law may actually be motivated by inclination. Kantian personhood, then, is based upon the *possibility* of rational or autonomous action. Such a concept has a much wider extension than the Hegelian concept.⁴³

Whatever advantage Hegel's conception of free agency may possess over Kant's in not resting on the noumenal/phenomenal distinction, there are two serious problems with his concept of personhood which enable his pejorative comments about Africans. The claim that slaves have not yet the courage to rebel, in the context of the struggle for recognition, has an a priori character that can blind one to the facts of the matter. This is no doubt part of the reason why Hegel maintained his view about the natural docility of blacks in light of empirical evidence to the contrary. As already noted, what the Africans lacked *vis-à-vis* the European slave traders was not courage but weapons. They

³⁷ PH 96.

³⁸ PR 41–4.

³⁹ PR 44.

⁴⁰ PR 57.

⁴¹ 431a, my translation.

⁴² 'Our own will, so far as it would act only under the condition of a universal legislation rendered possible by its maxims — this will, ideally possible for us, is the proper object of respect, and the dignity of humanity consists just in its capacity of giving universal laws, although with the condition that it is itself subject to this same legislation.' Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York, 1959), pp. 58–9.

⁴³ Terry Pinkard argues that personhood 'is not merely a descriptive category but also an evaluative one'. While this clearly is the case, it should also be noted that compared to the Kantian concept (which is in principle non-descriptive), the Hegelian concept is a good deal more descriptive. Cf. *Hegel's Dialectic: The Explanation of Possibility* (Philadelphia, 1988), p. 124.

obviously struggled but were beaten (with the exception of the Haitian revolt) by more advanced firepower. Such a lack could not conceivably merit their slavery. Secondly, the view that one is not a person until one wins recognition has the dubious consequence that the moral status of an individual or a people is improved substantially by the winning of the struggle for recognition. It entails the absurd view that one can have no moral grounds for siding with the oppressed, only with the victors. But surely if the cause was right after the victory, it was also right before. Nothing about the cause has changed.

It is not the case, however, that Hegel's racism follows necessarily from his fundamental claims about spirit. On the account sketched above, the natural forces which are behaviourally determinative and their exact effect are contingent matters. There is no theoretical reason why Hegel should have viewed race as psychologically and socially significant. Some natural properties are certainly necessary in order for one to be capable of achieving human personhood (leaving out of consideration the possibility of other persons, whether other animals or androids), but they need not include race. Furthermore, the story of the struggle for recognition can be maintained as an important explanation for how freedom is attained, without making the achievement of recognition a necessary condition for personhood.

In fact Hegel's view of the racial 'inferiority' of blacks constitutes an exceptional case in his account of society and the different roles within an ethical community. Susan Easton has presented a strong case for the position that Hegel's account of the role of women within the ethical community is not based upon biological reductionism.⁴⁴ Allen Wood has demonstrated that Hegel's exclusion of the agricultural estate and women from full participation in rational public life is due to the view that modern ethical life must reconcile two necessary but distinct spiritual realms: feeling and reflection.⁴⁵ Although the 'Philosophy of Subjective Spirit' gives an account of the biological category of race, there is no similar account of the biological category of sex. The claim that the biological category of race can have such spiritual significance is, in light of this, unique.

The reasons for this unusual claim can perhaps be traced to the method of Hegel's political philosophy. In a revealing passage in the preface to *Philosophy of Right* Hegel informs the reader of his view of the relationship between the claims of political theory and the accepted views of everyday life.

After all, the truth about right, ethics, and the state is as old as its public recognition and inherently in the law of the land, in the morality of everyday life, and in religion. What more does this truth require — since the thinking mind is not content to possess it in this ready fashion? It requires to be grasped in thought as well; the content which is already

⁴⁴ Susan M. Easton, 'Hegel and Feminism', in *Hegel and Modern Philosophy*, ed. David Lamb (New York, 1987), pp. 30–55.

⁴⁵ Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, pp. 241–6.

rational in principle must win the form of rationality and so appear well-founded to untrammelled thinking.⁴⁶

The claim that views about the world as they exist in everyday life are rational in content, and that the philosopher serves only to make them rational in form as well, suggest that the philosophical project is fundamentally conservative. The philosopher's labour is to justify the ethical views of everyday life.

Now, by the time that Hegel was writing and lecturing on subjective spirit in the early part of the nineteenth century, European nations had been involved in the slave trade for well over three hundred years. The industrialization of Europe and the development of the New World was being bought with the blood of millions of Africans.⁴⁷ In this terrible chapter of the history of Western civilization common opinion, including that of many of the educated Europeans, was to accept the practices of the slave trade because of the supposed moral inferiority of the Africans. Ironically it was the very practices of the slave trade which were destroying African culture and thus reinforcing the ideology of the moral inferiority of Africans.⁴⁸

During Hegel's time, and prior to it, the German states were not often directly involved in colonialism and the slave trade, but that seems not to be for lack of trying.⁴⁹ Throughout Europe, however, the general ideology justified the practices of the slave trade. Before the nineteenth century the justification was to be found primarily on religious grounds. But as George Stocking, a historian of the anthropology of that era, has demonstrated, the justification in the nineteenth century was increasingly taken up by men of science and letters intent on demonstrating the 'inferiority' of non-Europeans and the need for the penetration of 'civilized' society.

Civilizing efforts on behalf of dark-skinned savages could, over time, eliminate savagery from the world, not by destroying savage populations, but by modifying their hereditary incapacity. In the mean time — which might be shorter or longer depending on the weight one gave to present as opposed to cumulative past experience — it was both scientifically and morally respectable for civilized Europeans to take up the white man's burden.⁵⁰

The general ideology served to justify slave trading and colonial practices by presenting the inferiority of the Africans and the rightness of civilizing them. This is most certainly what is behind such claims of Hegel's as the following:

⁴⁶ *PR* preface, p. 3.

⁴⁷ cf. Davidson, *The African Slave Trade*, Ch. 3, section 4.

⁴⁸ Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, pp. 95–146.

⁴⁹ A brief account of failed attempts by German states to acquire colonies can be found in Hajo Holborn, *A History Of Modern Germany 1648–1840* (New York, 1963), pp. 40–1.

⁵⁰ George W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York, 1987), p. 237.

'Negroes are enslaved by Europeans and sold to America. Bad as this may be, their lot in their own land is even worse, since there a slavery quite as absolute exists.'⁵¹ Acceptance of the general ideology may also have played a role in distracting Hegel from the relevant facts about the achievements of Africans.

The justification of colonialism and slavery in terms of the European mission of civilization was the ideological raw material at hand for Hegel; his particular labour, despite the liberal side of his political philosophy, served to demonstrate the *rationality* of the existing views and social arrangements.⁵² After all, a consequence which Hegel draws from the ideal reconstruction of the relationship between the slave and the master is that the condition of slavery is necessary for a people in order that it might acquire the character which is worthy of, and necessary for, a free people.

This subjugation of the slave's egotism forms the beginning of true human freedom . . . To become free, to acquire the capacity for self-control, all nations must therefore undergo the severe discipline of subjection to a master . . . Slavery and tyranny are, therefore, in the history of nations a necessary stage and hence relatively justified.⁵³

There are, however, apparent textual grounds for a defence of Hegel's views on slavery along the following two lines.

First of all, Hegel seems to believe that slaves will in general triumph, and that this is partially because masters will eventually see equality as being in their interests as well. It is important to note that the *Encyclopedia* account of the story of the struggle for recognition has a happy ending, contrary to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* account. In the former mutual recognition is achieved; both parties achieve personhood. Moreover, Hegel sometimes seems quite optimistic about the ability of slaves in general to prevail:

What is more, once a people does not simply think of itself as wanting to be free, but actually possesses the energetic will of freedom, no human power will be able to hold it back in servitude of its merely putting up with being governed.⁵⁴

⁵¹ PH 96. See also note 25.

⁵² Marx raises a similar criticism against Hegel in another context. In speaking about capital punishment Marx charges Hegel with merely wrapping existing institutions in the cloak of rationality. 'Looking, however, more closely into the matter, we discover that German idealism here, as in most other instances, has but given a transcendental sanction to the rules of existing society.' Karl Marx, 'Capital Punishment', *New York Daily Tribune* (18 February 1853), as quoted in Jeffrie G. Murphy, 'Marxism and Retribution', in *Marx, Justice, and History: A Philosophy & Public Affairs Reader*, ed. Cohen, Nagel and Scanlon (Princeton, 1980).

⁵³ 435a.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Furthermore, a happy ending is beneficial to the master (as well as the slave) because recognition by an equal is what the master desires. This is pointed out by Susan Easton in order to mitigate Hegel's justification of slavery.⁵⁵

In fact Hegel does claim that the abolition of colonialism and slavery could be of benefit to colonists and slave holders.

In modern times, colonies have not been allowed the same rights as those left at home, and the result of this situation has been wars and finally independence, as may be seen in the history of the English and Spanish colonies. Colonial independence proves to be of the greatest advantage to the mother country, just as the emancipation of slaves turns out to be the greatest advantage of the owners.⁵⁶

The colonies that should be granted independence in this passage are clearly administered by former residents of the colonizing state, hence the significance of 'those left at home'. The colonists are members of the same ethical community as the resident citizens of the colonizing state, those left at home. Recognition of the colonists as bearers of equal rights is likely to have the positive result of them recognizing the resident citizens. Such recognition is the desire which drives the struggle for recognition; thus recognition of the colonists is likely to be beneficial to the resident citizens too. If the slave is capable of personhood, that is capable of membership in the ethical community, then recognition of the slave as the bearer of equal rights would likewise also be beneficial to the owner. However, Allen Wood has rightly pointed out that the claim that personhood requires recognition from another, who in the process is also recognized as a person, does not entail that all human beings have the status of persons. There may be clearly defined criteria (in this case race) which exclude some from the community of persons.⁵⁷ In the 'Philosophy of Subjective Spirit' Hegel seems to claim that for blacks race has exactly this status. The terms 'slave' and 'owner' in the passage above, then, should be understood to apply to the ideal reconstruction of the struggle for recognition, not to the historical case of the African slave trade. Furthermore, only classical, not contemporary, examples are cited in those passages in which Hegel seems optimistic about the victory of slaves.⁵⁸

Secondly, if all human beings are potentially rational, potentially free, then personhood is not ruled out eternally for the 'inferior' races. Slavery then may be a *prima facie* wrong even though, all things considered, historically justified. There is evidence that Hegel also held a view like this:

⁵⁵ Easton, 'Hegel and Feminism', pp. 45–6.

⁵⁶ PR 248a.

⁵⁷ Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, p. 93.

⁵⁸ 435r.

Slavery is in and for itself *injustice*, for the essence of humanity is *freedom*; but for this man must be matured. The gradual abolition of slavery is therefore wiser and more equitable than its sudden removal.⁵⁹

Recall also the second half of a quotation cited earlier:

Human beings are implicitly rational; therein lies the possibility of equal rights for all people and the nullification of any rigid distinction between members of the human species who possess rights and those who do not.⁶⁰

The problem with this line of argumentation is that it does not pay sufficient attention to the biological basis that Hegel lays for the different role assignments of blacks and whites. The possibility of equal rights for all does not become real until personhood is achieved. Given the racism of the 'Philosophy of Subjective Spirit', it should come as no surprise if Hegel were to claim that Africans, due to their nature, constituted an exceptional case of a race for which personhood is either impossible or improbable. Hegel is noticeably pessimistic about the possibility of blacks progressing towards personhood:

From these various traits it is manifest that want of self-control distinguishes the character of the Negroes. This condition is capable of no development or culture, and as we see them at this day, such have they always been. The only essential connection that has existed and continued between the Negroes and the Europeans is that of slavery.⁶¹

Both lines of defence fail to give sufficient consideration to the amount of weight that Hegel gives to the biological category of race; an amount which he need not have given it, and which it cannot be given if the philosophy of spirit is to remain valuable for liberatory ends.⁶²

Darrel Moellendorf

CALIFORNIA STATE
POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY, POMONA

⁵⁹ PH 99.

⁶⁰ 393a, my translation.

⁶¹ PH 98.

⁶² Easton in 'Hegel and Feminism' gives a lucid account of this value. Finally, I would like to thank the anonymous referee from the *History of Political Thought* for the helpful comments.