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Hegel's Answer to the 'Academy' Question: Is it Permissible to Deceive a People?

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Abstract: In 1780 Frederick II pushed the Prussian Academy to put forward a controversial question for a public essay contest: "Is it useful for the people to be deceived, be it by leading it into new errors or by confirming it in those which it upholds?" Although Hegel would have been too young to participate in the contest, he took two later opportunities to provide what would have been his answer. Whereas the *Phenomenology of Spirit* evaluates Enlightenment's charge that religious faith is based on deception, the *Philosophy of Right* suggests that public opinion formation tends to lead to collective self-deception. In both versions of his answer, however, Hegel argues that *it is impossible to deceive a people about its essence*. In this paper I clarify what Hegel means by a people's essence and why he thinks it impossible to deceive a people about it.

Keywords: Hegel, deception, self-deception, enlightenment, public opinion

1 Introduction

Is it permissible to deceive a people? Ist es erlaubt, ein Volk zu täuschen? This is Hegel's version of a question posed by the Prussian Academy of the Sciences in Berlin for an essay contest in the year 1780. Although the essay contest took place before Hegel was old enough to enter a submission – he was only 10 at that time – he took two later opportunities to provide what would have been his answer. He alludes to this essay contest in a chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) on the Enlightenment's struggle against superstition, and then again in the context of his evaluation of public opinion in the *Philosophy of Right* (1820). In both texts, Hegel seems to claim that the only convincing answer to the question is that it is *impossible* to deceive a people. Given the impossibility of this deception, the question concerning its permissibility is a moot point.

This is admittedly a counterintuitive claim. What about propaganda, ideology, and in our day fake news and alternative facts? Is Hegel denying the possibility

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of these phenomena? This would make his own position either easily defeated by counter evidence, or incapable of accounting for many patent aspects of social and political life in his day and our own. But Hegel qualifies his answer. What he claims is that it is not possible to deceive a people about its *essence*. In this way Hegel draws a distinction among conceivable objects of deceptions. According to Hegel's position, although a people can be deceived about many things, it cannot be deceived about its essence. In the following I will consider what he means by essence in his answer and why he thinks it impossible to deceive a people about it.[1]

Given Hegel's flippant tone, it is easy to get the impression that he mentions the 'academy' question only in order to dismiss it. This is probably the reason that his answer has not garnered much scholarly attention.[2] My aim in this paper is show that his answer deserves a reconstruction because it bears on core tenets defended in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right*. On the one hand, both passages issue the verdict that it is impossible to deceive a people about its essence. In this respect, Hegel puts forward a single answer to the 'academy' question. On the other hand, Hegel's two answers differ in telling ways. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel addresses the role of religion in propagating deception, making the case that a people's essence is not the sort of thing about which one can be deceived. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel shifts attention from religion to politics and contrasts two ways of being deceived, making the case that a people can deceive itself. In my reconstruction, I will focus on the reasons Hegel offers in favor of his overarching conclusion, foregrounding how these reasons emerge internally to his arguments in each text.

There is also a broader reason to take an interest in Hegel's answer, for it allows us to track his position on religious faith, public opinion, and common sense. In both texts, Hegel conceives of common sense in the true sense of that term as genuine knowledge. But in his later answer, he suggests that this knowledge is vulnerable to self-deception. Hegel seems especially concerned about the impact of representational thinking (*Vorstellung*). Although he draws an unfavorable comparison between representational thinking and the type of conceptual comprehension of which only philosophy is truly capable, it is not clear whether he seeks to substitute one for the other. Hegel's answer thus raises questions about the extent to which he takes himself to be 'enlightening' his own readership and whether he

1 *Wesen* is a central concept in the *Science of Logic*, especially in the *Wesenslogik*. I do not think that Hegel here alludes to the term 'essence' in this technical sense. I will thus focus on how he uses the term in the relevant passages of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right.*

2 Some scholars have noticed that the two passages together constitute Hegel's answer to the 'academy' question, even though they do not provide detailed readings of these passages. See Kobe 2019 and Bourke 2023.

sees philosophy as a suitable means for doing so. In short, does Hegel see himself as an agent of the Enlightenment, someone whose task is to bring 'light' into a condition of widespread 'darkness'?

While both the *Phenomenology* and the *Philosophy of Right* clearly allude to the question that was put forward by the Prussian Academy in the context of the 1780 essay contest, Hegel's version of the question is in fact not identical to the official one, which reads as follows: "Is it useful to the people to be deceived, be it by leading it into new errors or by confirming it in those which it upholds?" [*Ist es dem Volk nützlich, betrogen zu werden, sei es, dass man es in neue Irrtümer führt oder in denen die es unterhält, bestätigt?*] Two discrepancies are worth noting. The Academy asked whether it is (1) *useful* (not whether it is *permissible*) and (2) *to* the people *to be deceived* (and not *to deceive* a people).[3] The official formulation had a complicated history and generated confusion and controversy at the time it was put forward by the Prussian Academy. As I hope to show, Hegel's point is illuminated by the specific context to which he responded when he decided to put forward his answer to the 'academy' question. I will thus begin by sketching the history of this question (section 2) and Hegel's version of the question (section 3). I will then turn to Hegel's answer in the *Phenomenology* (section 4) and the *Philosophy of Right* (section 5).

2 The Official Question

Frederick II, whom Hegel describes as a 'great spirit' in the *Philosophy of Right*, shaped the Academy of the Prussian Sciences with a heavy hand.[4] He showed interest in taking over the Academy, which was initially founded in 1700 but had fallen into neglect, before he even assumed the throne in 1740. Frederick then demanded a report on its current state only five days into his reign, although it took a few years until its official reinstitution, with the French mathematician Maupertuis as its new president.[5] Under Frederick's direction, the Academy merged several scholarly societies, was renamed the *Royal* Academy, and introduced an essay contest, which issued 37 questions between 1745 and 1787.[6] The introduction of this essay

3 Hegel also substitutes '*täuschen*' for '*betrügen*' but uses the term '*Betrug*' in a key passage. Although the term *Betrug* refers to a deliberate deception and the term *Täuschung* can also be used for a faultless mistake, I will treat them as interchangeable here.

4 Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 26.

5 Adler 2007, XX–XXIII.

6 Adler 2007, XXIII

contest was especially significant for Frederick's aim to involve more people in the Academy's otherwise esoteric activities.[7] In an ode to the Academy, Frederick cites the elimination of 'prejudice, error, and barbarism' as this institution's highest goal.[8]

It was part of Frederick's agenda to merge absolute monarchy and Enlightenment ideals. His role in the Academy was marked by a tension inherent in this agenda, a tension that also kept rearing its head in the course of this specific essay contest. For example, it was Frederick who compelled the Academy to pose the question of 1780 against the strong preferences of many of its members, and to do so outside of the usual essay contest schedule, which is how this contest incurred its label "*extraordinaire*."[9] Moreover, Frederick subsequently curtailed freedom of the press for the Academy's publications in case there were any controversial submissions, allegedly in order to avoid bad international relations, as the contest was to take place on an international scale.[10] Since winning contributions were to be published, he wanted to avoid a situation in which someone wins the prize while publicly casting a neighboring state in a negative light.

In order to understand why Frederick decided to push the 1780 question onto the Prussian Academy, thereby compromising its scholarly independence and institutional self-determination, we need to take note of the fact that this question was formulated against the backdrop of an ongoing conflict between church and state power. Frederick permitted a relatively high degree of religious freedom in Prussia, for instance by tolerating Jesuits who had been banned in France and elsewhere in Europe. He was also a vocal critic of the Roman Catholic Church and claimed in a letter that the authority of the pope was grounded in the "general stupidity of the nations."[11] This turn of phrase indicates that Frederick was concerned primarily with religious forms of deception when he posed the 1780 question, though the question opened the door to inquiries into the expediency of political lies.[12]

Frederick's preoccupation with religious forms of deception becomes even more evident in the written exchange between him and d'Alembert that led up to

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7 These essay contests had a great impact beyond the Academy (Prunea-Bretonnet 2022, 8).

8 Adler 2007, XXIII.

9 Frederick forced them to withdraw a metaphysical question about original powers, which the Prussian Academy had authored independently of him.

10 Frederick suspended freedom from censorship, which he himself had put into place in 1749 (Adler 2007, XLV–XLVI).

11 Adler 2007, XXX.

12 In his book *Anti-Machiavel*, which he published anonymously with Voltaire's help, Frederick had launched an argument against Machiavelli by claiming that rulers should keep their word. But Frederick's concerns were distinctly political: rulers should keep their word in order to avoid accruing a bad reputation with other rulers.

the essay contest of 1780, but was not publicly known at that time.[13] The correspondence was initiated by d'Alembert, a French *philosophe* interested in defending a robustly public form of philosophy. It was d'Alembert who in a letter to Frederick proposed the question "*is it useful to deceive the people*?" ten years prior to the official essay contest.[14] The Academy rejected this blunt version of the question as too polemical, which is why it came to assume a less direct form, namely, *whether it is useful to the people to be deceived*. In their letters, however, d'Alembert and Frederick disputed an altogether different version of this question, namely, *whether a people that has been brought up in a religious system can get by without myths and fables.* Frederick answered this question in the negative, whereas d'Alembert took a positive view. According to d'Alembert, philosophy in the true sense of the word ought to be put to the service of truth-telling. Although Frederick did not share D'Alembert's view, d'Alembert's view raised a challenge to Frederick's self-conception as a 'philosopher-king.' Because Frederick wanted to prove his philosophical credentials, d'Alembert was able to pressure the monarch into pushing the 1780 question onto the Academy.[15]

What exactly was Frederick's own stance? Although he regarded himself as an agent of the Enlightenment, Frederick had a rather pessimistic assessment of the people and their receptivity to the Enlightenment project. According to him, a world without prejudice or superstition is at most a beautiful fantasy, since the human being is an "incorrigible animal" who cannot be made to conform to the demands of reason.[16] This assessment led Frederick to conclude that a people cannot get by without deeply entrenched myths and fables and that all attempts to spread the naked truth are not worth the trouble. Note that he implicitly identifies deception with presenting the truth in a form that is non-transparent, rather than with the spreading of false information. In the end it was Frederick's verdict that deception in the sense of disguising or covering the truth is legitimate because unavoidable. Considering his disagreement with d'Alembert on this front, we can see why he took an interest in this question and why it came to seem pressing to him.

13 Key members of the Academy did not know that the 1780 question had originated in this correspondence with d'Alembert (Lim 2017, 377).

14 In these letters, D'Alembert praised the Prussian Academy for its intellectual freedom: unlike scholarly societies like those in Paris and London, it did not have to coexist with a local university that could exert censorship. For D'Alembert this allowed the Prussian Academy to pose controversial essay questions (Aarsleff 1989, 194–195).

15 See Lim 2017 for a detailed discussion of the trajectory of their correspondence. According to Lim, what was at stake was a difference of opinion about true philosophy.

16 The relevant letter is quoted in Lim 2017, 372.

Once the official version of the question was announced to the public, it was immediately flagged as controversial. Moreover, it was often misinterpreted as asking, "is it useful to deceive the people" (the people appearing in the accusative), rather than "is it useful to the people to be deceived" (the people appearing in the dative). As we will see, this is a mistake that Hegel made as well. The former version of the question implies the active deception of one group by another, whereas the latter denotes a passive form of deception, that is, a people remaining deceived by holding on to errors they happen to believe. The former version of the question also implies that it is useful to the ones that are doing the deceiving to deceive, which is an easier sell, whereas the latter version implies that it is useful to the deceived that they be deceived, which is far less obvious. As this misreading of the question suggests, it was common to interpret the question as expressing criticism of the Enlightenment project of proliferating public reason, since it was open to contributions that favored active forms of deception.

But the question even in its official formulation can also be interpreted as merely challenging the scope and reach of the Enlightenment project. Whether deception is understood in an active or passive sense, it would produce a division in the 'age of Enlightenment' between those who are enlightened and those who are unenlightened, a division that Frederick considered insurmountable. According to Hans Adler, the question could thus be reformulated as: *is enlightenment divisible?*[17] In other words, is an internal division between the enlightened and the unenlightened compatible with the Enlightenment's ideals? Adler even credits the 1780 question with bringing about a change in the Enlightenment's course, ushering in the stage of 'late' Enlightenment. All in all, it seems hard to overstate the role that the 1780 question played in both the Enlightenment's self-understanding and its retrospective meaning.

As this historical context indicates, the question was very much of its time. But as Adler remarks, the formulation of the official question seems to point back to Plato's reflections on the subject.[18] In the *Republic*, Socrates makes the following claim: "it looks as though our rulers will have to employ a great many lies and deceptions for the benefit of those they rule. And you remember, I suppose, we said all such things were useful as a kind of drug."[19] Here Socrates argues in favor of what is known as the 'noble lie' deliberately propagated by a political elite to justify a stratified social order. The lies in question would consist of, or at least involve

17 The title of his introductory essay to a collection of the contributions to this essay contest is "Ist Aufklärung teilbar? Die Preisfrage der Preußischen Akademie für 1780."

18 See Adler 2007, XXV–XXVI.

19 Plato, *Republic* 459c-d.

myths, whose purpose is to motivate people to maintain this social order. The prime example in the *Republic* is the myth of the three metals intended to make palatable a division of society into classes of producers, auxiliaries, and guardians. What is meant by deception in this case is not a misrepresentation of facts, but a myth about the justification of a social order.

According to Plato's argument, it is beneficial not only to the rulers themselves that they spread lies in the form of myths, but also to those who are ruled that they be so deceived, since they too are better off when they inhabit a stratified social order.[20] It cannot be a coincidence that this specific passage is close to the formulation of the 1780 question many centuries later. Perhaps it indicates that the academy wanted to demonstrate that the question had respectable roots that reach as far back as the ancients.[21] But these same words would have had a very different ring when Plato penned them. In fact, Plato's problem was not identical to the one that preoccupied Frederick and his contemporaries.[22] Whereas Plato was interested in new lies in the form of mythic explanations like that of the three metals, which he himself proposed, Frederick and his contemporaries confronted a web of 'old lies' put in place by religious institutions.

3 Hegel's Interpretation of the 1780 Question

Let us now turn to Hegel's interpretation of the 1780 question. The first thing to note is a point of continuity between the official question and Hegel's version, for Hegel is taking over a reference to 'people' in both texts. But here we already see one difference, for Hegel presents his version in terms of 'a people' (*ein Volk*), which calls to mind a plurality of nations, whereas the official question was put in terms of 'the people' (*das Volk*) which calls to mind undifferentiated 'masses,' the people in the pejorative sense. Given the textual contexts of Hegel's two passages, it is clear that Hegel is not concerned with something as narrow as a nation, or with a people's relation to its specifically national character. Yet he is also not concerned with something as indeterminate as the masses, a term laden with negative connotations.[23]

20 This suggests a very different reason for deception from that provided by Machiavelli, who considered only the utility to the rulers (not the ruled) (Adler 2007, XXVI–XXVII).

21 For a detailed bibliography on discussions of the 'noble lie' during this time, see Lim 2017, 376 n77.

22 According to Adler, Plato's problem was the 'aporia of power,' because power is the basis of what counts as right but cannot itself be grounded in right (Adler 2007, XXVI).

23 For a discussion of Hegel's conception of *Volk*, see Moland 2012.

Although Hegel repeats this reference to 'people' of the official question, it assumes an idiosyncratic significance in the context of his philosophical project.[24] As becomes clear through his discussion in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, this reference to the people is a reference to that which Hegel calls 'spirit,' which is another term for a 'spiritual' *community*. According to the *Phenomenology*, 'spirit' is to be understood as a collective subject, a group *agent* that actively produces a world and a group *knower* that knows the world. This means that his question about the permissibility of deception concerns the ways in which such spiritual communities produce and understand the concrete practices by which they are constituted.

When taking a second look at the 'academy' question, we can wonder why the official question was posed about the people and whether it implies that the people is uniquely vulnerable to deception. Were Frederick II and D'Alembert assuming that groups of people are especially gullible, or especially 'stupid,' when compared with individuals taken on their own? In Hegel's case, we can relatedly wonder whether his question assumes that the people is uniquely *invulnerable* to deception when so compared. Indeed, his answer seems to imply that there is something about spiritual communities that excludes deception. Even if it were an open question whether I can deceive you about your own essence, for Hegel it does not seem to be an equally open question whether I can deceive a spiritual community taken as a whole about its own essence. But such a distinction between groups and individuals should not be exaggerated, for Hegel is quite explicit that spirit, albeit irreducible to its individual members, only exists because individuals participate in its constitution and perpetuation.

Hegel's reference to the people does raise a further issue concerning the boundaries by which spiritual communities are circumscribed. Who belongs to the people and are there people who do not so belong? The academy question itself appears to hinge on such a distinction between inside and outside, since it conjures a picture of someone who is standing apart from the people and subjecting it to an external form of deception, or of someone who is in a position to judge that this deception is taking place on a mass scale. It presupposes that someone knows better than the people and can get them to accept or maintain lies or can enlighten them by means of truth-telling. Although Hegel is indeed assuming a difference between the deceiver and the deceived, he in both texts denies the stability of such a distinction between inside and outside. Whether he is speaking about the agents of the Enlight-

24 In the context of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel mentions his answer in his Spirit chapter, specifically in connection with religious (note: rather than national) communities. In the context of the *Philosophy of Right*, he mentions his answer in his discussion of public opinion, in which context he characterizes the people as the '*hoi polloi*,' the many, and hence an aggregate of individuals (PR § 301R).

enment or about deceptive priests or politicians, Hegel emphasizes that they are all integrated into a larger whole, the shape of a shared spirit, despite the internal polarizations to which such shapes give rise.

This feature of Hegel's position provides him with one preliminary reason to question the 1780 formulation of the question. If those who tell lies are themselves members of the community that is being subjected to a lie, in what sense is their deception of others genuinely external to the people in question? Is a community in this case not rather *lying to itself* by means of one of its constituent parts? Seen in this way, deception is impossible not because a people cannot be deceived about its own essence, but because no one is really external to a people and hence in a position to deceive it in the first place.

Some have pursued such a direction. For example, Robert Pippin argues that Hegel is developing an account of collective 'self-deceit,' according to which self-deception at the collective level can include cooperation between the deceiver and the deceived.[25] The example Pippin provides is that of a rigoristic moralist, who convinces not only himself but also his audience that he is as morally pure as he claims to be. And if I am receptive to this kind deception on another's part, then the fact that I am deceived by another cannot be something that happens to me without my involvement. Pippin writes that "[g]ullibility is also a form of self-deceit ('hearing what one wants to hear') and is as culpable."[26] Here he follows Bernard Williams, who has suggested that the spreading of political lies through media amounts to a 'conspiracy' between the deceiver and the deceived.[27]

Although I do not deny the possibility of collective 'self-deceit' of this kind, I do not think that it provides a key to Hegel's answer to the 'academy' question.[28] For one, what Hegel writes about collective self-deception in the *Philosophy of Right* is quite different from the conception of self-deception that Pippin ascribes to him.[29] As we will see, Hegel is not claiming that people 'hear what they want to hear' when they allow themselves to be fooled by political leaders, but that people tend to deceive themselves about what they already know when they form public opinions. For another, Hegel is not claiming that deception is impossible simply because it is

25 Pippin 2018.

26 Pippin 2018, 181.

27 Williams 1996, 615.

28 Just to be clear, providing an answer the 'academy' question was not Pippin's aim.

29 Pippin's examples of collective self-deception come primarily from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As Moyar (forthcoming) notes, Pippin's paper does not mention the passage from the *Philosophy of Right* in which Hegel discusses collective self-deception. Moyar also points out that this passage suggests that Hegel thinks that "we are much better than our talk, whereas Pippin and Williams hold that we are much worse."

never genuinely external, so that every case of seemingly external deception can be redescribed as a case of communal self-deception. I take him to recognize that this would be highly dissatisfying to those who are gripped by the question and worried about the prospect of widespread deception. Why should they be appeased if told that all deception is ultimately 'internal' in this formal sense? Hegel will have to harness other resources to make his answer convincing.

Let us now return to the difference between Hegel's version of the question and the version put forward to the public in 1780. What explains his relatively significant departure from the official formulation? We have already seen that the active form (*is it useful to deceive the people*) rather than the passive form (*is it useful to the people to be deceived*) was a common misinterpretation at that time. But Hegel also replaced 'useful' with 'permissible.'[30] One way to explain this would be that Hegel took this to be the more interesting question, since it does not reduce permissibility to utility. This way of putting the question allows for the possibility that deception could nonetheless be impermissible even if it turns out to be useful. Another option would be to take into consideration that Hegel believed that the Enlightenment, as a historical form of spirit, did in fact reduce permissibility to utility. As he makes clear in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the Enlightenment prizes the norm of utility most highly, treating it as a standard by which to determine objectivity (PS ¶560). For Hegel this standard has direct implications for laws and institutions, since their status as genuine objects, and hence as enduring and abiding, depends on whether they are regarded as useful to those who are to follow or inhabit them. In the eyes of the French Revolutionaries, the laws and institutions they inherited fell short of this norm, which meant that they regarded it as permitted to abolish them. By putting 'permissibility' in the place of 'utility,' Hegel is perhaps drawing out this normative dimension that was already implied in the official version of the 1780 question.

4 The Phenomenology of Spirit

With this background in place, I turn to the passage from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in which Hegel provides the first version of his answer:

30 This question continued to be seen as controversial in the intervening years, and in 1788 Jean Paul (a writer whom Hegel read and admired) attacked it in the following form: whether it is permissible to enlighten the rabble (*ob man den Pöbel aufklären dürfte*). Even if Hegel would not have been familiar with this specific text, it suggests that similar rewordings (in terms of permissibility and impermissibility) could have been in circulation. See Adler 2007, L–LI.

> If the general question has been put forward, whether it is permissible to deceive a people, the answer would in fact have to be that the question is no good, because it is impossible to deceive a people on this matter. Brass instead of gold, counterfeit instead of genuine money, may well be passed off in isolated cases; a battle lost as a battle won pushed onto many; and other lies about sensible things and discrete events can be made believable for a time. But in the knowledge of that essence (*Wesen*), wherein consciousness has immediate certainty of itself, the idea of deception falls away. (PS ¶550)[31]

Although Hegel does not mention that this was the 'academy' question of 1780, it is a reference that his readers would not have missed. Note that Hegel is calling the question 'no good' (*taugt nichts*), which at first suggests a dismissive attitude. But we soon see that the question provides Hegel with an opportunity to distinguish between two kinds of matters about which it could be raised: on the one hand, sensible things and discrete events, and on the other hand, the essence in the knowledge of which consciousness has immediate certainty of itself. He is claiming only that it is impossible to deceive a people with respect to the latter. So, what does Hegel mean by essence and why does he claim that in the knowledge of this essence, consciousness has 'immediate certainty of itself'?

This passage appears in Hegel's chapter on the Enlightenment's struggle against superstition, which means that its textual context coincides with the historical context in which this question was as a matter of fact posed. According to Hegel, agents of the Enlightenment adopt a negative attitude toward their opponent, the religiously faithful, whom they are trying to 'enlighten' by means of what he calls 'pure insight.' Hegel is playing with a set of visual metaphors – to peer through darkness, to bring luminosity and lucidity, to illuminate or disillusion. He memorably likens this process of enlightenment to the diffusion of a scent in an unresisting atmosphere and, less flatteringly, to the spreading of an infectious disease (PS ¶545). But his thesis throughout this chapter is that pure insight is in fact parasitic on the very thing it rejects.[32] Pure insight can maintain its mission to

31 I altered the Miller translation. Here is the German: "Wenn die allgemeine Frage aufgestellt worden ist, *ob es erlaubt sei, ein Volk zu täuschen*, so müsste in der Tat die Antwort sein, dass die Frage nichts tauge, weil es unmöglich ist, hierin ein Volk zu tauschen. – Messing statt Goldes, nachgemachte Wechsel statt echter mögen wohl einzeln verkauft, eine verlorene Schlacht als eine gewonnene mehreren aufgeheftet und sonstige Lügen über sinnliche Dinge und einzelne Begebenheiten auf eine Zeitlang glaubhaft gemacht werden; aber in dem Wissen von dem Wesen, worin das Bewusstsein die unmittelbare Gewissheit seiner selbst hat, fällt der Gedanke der Täuschung ganz hinweg."

32 One criticism is that pure insight has a faith in reason, so that it is not free from a faith of its own.

disabuse others of errors and deceptions only as long as there are people that fit that description, namely, others in need of disabusing.

This logic of the Enlightenment project points in the direction of a culprit responsible for errors and deceptions, which in this context must be the priests. Here is how Hegel describes the view adopted by pure insight:

> Just as it sees faith in general to be a tissue of superstitions, prejudices, and errors, so it further sees the consciousness of this content organized into a realm of error in which false insight, common to the mass of people, is immediate, naïve and unreflective; but it also has within it the moment of reflection-into-self, or of self-consciousness, separated from its naivete, in the shape of an insight which remains independently in the background, and an evil intention by which the general mass of the people is befooled. The masses are the victims of the deception (*Betrug*) of a priesthood. (PS ¶542)

According to this passage, the Enlightenment regards its opponent as double-sided. One side is the mass of people who are conscious of this realm of error in an immediate, naïve, and unreflective manner. Another side is the priesthood, which represents a self-conscious, and hence deliberate and nefarious relationship to this realm. According to the view adopted by pure insight, the mass of people is simply the victim of a deception – and here Hegel uses the term from the original essay contest, *Betrug* – perpetrated by those who are spreading error with an evil intention. It suits the agents of the Enlightenment to regard the mass of people as vulnerable to 'false insight,' because it suggests that this very same mass could be made receptive to 'pure insight' instead. Because this view is a product of pure insight's perspective, Hegel cautions us to take it with a grain of salt.

In fact, one of Hegel's general criticisms of pure insight is that it consistently misconstrues the nature of religious faith. This applies in particular to one aspect of religion, namely, the attitude of faith toward its object of worship. According to Hegel, faith is wedded to a firm distinction between subjective belief and an objective reality. For this reason, Hegel describes faith as an instance of representational thinking (*Vorstellung*). Unlike pure insight, faith does have an object of its own, but an object represented as imbued with divine qualities. From pure insight's perspective, this makes faith an easy target. For example, pure insight charges believers with falsely ascribing divine qualities to items used in religious ceremonies, pointing out that these items are just mundane sensible things – a block of stone, a hunk of wood, a piece of dough. It thereby misguidedly imagines that it is informing believers of something they do not already know.[33] The ultimate religious 'lie'

33 See PS ¶553. Hegel also claims that believers are engaged in a complicated act of double-perception: "The believing consciousness weighs and measures by two standards; it has two sorts of eyes,

presumably concerns not some sensible thing or other, but that which the religious community takes to be 'absolute being': God. It is this absolute being that is supposed to be the essence of faith, for it is this absolute being which is supposed to be the source of all divine qualities, even of mundane sensible things. From an 'enlightened' point of view, priests are propagating the lie that there is such a thing as an absolute being, and they are doing so in order to justify their own institutional power.

At this point Hegel comes to religious faith's defense, claiming that the absolute being worshipped by believers could not possibly be a lie. For Hegel, this being rather manifests itself to the faithful in a guise that pure insight is unequipped to appreciate:

> [T]he absolute being of faith is essentially not the *abstract* essence that would exist beyond the consciousness of the believer; on the contrary, it is the Spirit of the [religious] community, the unity of the abstract essence and self-consciousness. That it be the Spirit of the community, this requires as a necessary moment the action of the community. It is this Spirit, *only by being produced* by consciousness; or rather, it does not exist as the Spirit of the community without having been produced by consciousness [...] For essential as is the producing of it, this is equally essentially not the sole ground of absolute Being, but only a moment. Absolute Being is at the same time in and for itself. (PS ¶549)

What we are told is that the absolute being of faith is embodied in the very community of which believers are a part – in short, it is real, but as the *spirit of the community*.[34] The reason that pure insight cannot see this is that it does not give rise to a community with comparably robust ties. So, an additional criticism that Hegel raises against pure insight is that it is set on dissolving that which binds believers to one another without supplying anything that could take its place. Its historical victory over faith is thus haunted by a "yearning of the troubled Spirit which mourns over the loss of its spiritual world" (PS ¶573).

In the above passage, Hegel highlights two dimensions of the object of religious worship that serves as the essence of faith. (1) The first dimension is the object's dependence on consciousness: it is an object that is generated by the very act of worship. This dimension is crucial to the 'experiential' procedure employed throughout the *Phenomenology*, according to which that which was taken to be independent of consciousness is revealed to be produced by it, that is, to be an object only insofar as it is for consciousness (PS ¶86). It also illustrates Hegel's spe-

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two sorts of ears, speaks with two voices, has duplicated all ideas without comparing the twofold meaning" (PS ¶572).

34 For a similar interpretation of Hegel's conception of religious consciousness and religious communities, specifically in his Philosophy of Religion, see Wendte 2007 and Mooren 2018.

cific conception of spirit as a self-objectifying community, one that generates its own world. Spirit actively produces its manifestations, expressing itself in objects ranging from laws, institutions, and practices to mundane sensible things such as crosses, chalices, and loaves of bread. Hegel's passage suggests that this world, when taken as a whole, is the expression of the 'spirit of the community.' It is therefore also that which manifests absolute being, providing evidence of its reality.

(2) The second dimension of the religious object is its independence from consciousness. Hegel notes that consciousness-dependence is only one 'moment' of this object, for this moment 'is equally essentially not the sole ground of absolute being.' This is what I take Hegel to mean when he claims that this absolute being is 'at the same time in and for itself.' Without this additional moment, Hegel could be read as defending a thesis not unlike his successor Feuerbach, namely, that religious people take themselves to be acting in the service of God, but in fact worship a figment of their imagination. This does not seem to be Hegel's point. Hegel is accepting the faithful perspective on religious practices, according to which there is something genuinely *objective*, which in this context I take to mean consciousness-independent, at stake in these practices.[35] The spirit of the community is an object with a life of its own, irreducible to whatever consciousness seeks to make of it, even if it is at the very same time set into motion by it. Without consciousness, there would be no spirit of the community, because there would be no community in the first place. But what consciousness apprehends in apprehending this spirit is something other than itself. To put the claim in paradoxical terms, the object of faith is both made and found.[36] Hegel thinks that there are resources internal to religious practices for picturing this idea, specifically in the form of 'Holy Spirit.'[37]

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35 This is admittedly a contentious reading of the passage. Some would question whether the object can also be consciousness-independent if Hegel is claiming that it is consciousness-dependent. My reading rests on a broader interpretation of the experiential process, a discussion of which falls beyond the scope of this paper.

36 Hegel presents the point in terms of simultaneously producing and finding: "How are delusion and deception to take place where consciousness in its truth has directly the certainty of itself, where in its object it possesses its own self, since it just as much finds as produces itself in it? The distinction no longer exists even in words" (PS ¶550).

37 Hegel mentions the Holy Spirit explicitly in PS ¶553, in which he accuses the Enlightenment of defiling what to a spiritual community is its "eternal life," i. e., the Holy Spirit, by claiming that it is only a transitory thing. Hegel also alludes to the Holy Spirit at the end of the Morality chapter: it is God manifested "in the midst of those who know themselves in the form of pure knowing" (PS ¶671). These references to the Holy Spirit suggest that it does important work in 'visualizing' spirit in its simultaneously consciousness-dependent and consciousness-independent form. On the trinity, see also PS ¶771, in which Hegel claims that representational thinking pictures the movement of the 'concept' in terms of a 'natural relationship' between father and son.

(3) Absolute being exhibits a third dimension that needs to be added to the account. The object of faith is an object in which consciousness puts its *trust*, an object in which it *believes*. This additional moment emerges from the following passage:

> [Pure insight] talks about [priestly deception and deceiving the people] as if by some hocus-pocus of conjuring priests consciousness had been palmed off with something absolutely alien and other to it in place of its own essence; and at the same time it says that this is an essence of consciousness, that consciousness believes in it, puts its trust in it, i.e. consciousness beholds in it its pure essence just as much as its own single and universal individuality, and through this action produces this unity of itself with its essence. Thus what [pure insight] asserts to be alien to consciousness, it directly declares to be the inmost nature of consciousness itself. How then can it possibly talk of deception (*Täuschung*) and delusion (*Betrug*)? (PS ¶550)

In this passage, Hegel shows that even pure insight is committed to a view of faith as involving trust and belief. By 'trust' Hegel means a set of assumptions taken for granted by religious people, which can also be characterized as their common sense. But the common sense that informs faith becomes distorted once the representatives of pure insight interrogate the reasons underlying this trust, asking that the faithful justify what they do in rational terms. If the faithful try to defend their background assumptions, for example by citing historical evidence, they have already become corrupted by the Enlightenment and hence indistinguishable from it.

This passage makes clear that consciousness does not just make the object of worship and find it; it moreover trusts it as that in which it beholds "its pure essence." This third dimension is crucial, for it is this relation of trust that makes this object essential to consciousness. Hegel here defines what counts as the essence of consciousness relationally, that is, in terms of its relation to a practice or set of practices. Hence, the first two dimensions would not suffice to distinguish essence from sensible things and discrete events, since they too can be described as both found and made in Hegel's sense. In order for this object to count as consciousness' own essence, it must be so intimately bound up with consciousness that consciousness depends on it for its own sense of self, that is, for its immediate certainty of its own essential nature. The spirit of the community meets this further criterion, for consciousness relies on it both for its dealings with the world and for its self-conception as a faithful member of this community.

The above-cited passage is pitched as an internal criticism of pure insight: Hegel is accusing pure insight of being foolish (hence not as insightful as it takes itself to be) and of not knowing what it is saying (hence of contradicting itself). The contradiction can be cashed out in the following way. On the one hand, pure insight admits that this absolute being is the inmost nature of consciousness, since

it claims that believers orient their lives around what they represent to themselves as God, making absolute being most intimately familiar to them. On the other hand, pure insight insists that this absolute being is an alien being, hence the kind of thing about which manipulative priests could have produced a fiction. According to Hegel, these are mutually incompatible characterizations of an object. Although this is supposed to show that pure insight fails to be consistent in its charge, Hegel is in effect saying that one can only be deceived about that which appears as alien and other. Since whatever has the status of consciousness' essence is for that very reason not something taken to be alien and other, it does not qualify as the sort of matter about which one can be deceived.

This entire discussion serves as a prelude to Hegel's claim that it is impossible to deceive a people *on this matter*, that is, to his answer to the 'academy' question. Given this context, it is clear that Hegel is using his charitable interpretation of religious practices to present a lesson that transcends the constraints of faith. We are now able to see that 'on this matter' refers to whatever has the status of consciousness' essence, "that essential being wherein consciousness has immediate certainty of itself" (PS ¶550). Within traditional forms of religion, this essence is pictured as God, but it could also be rendered in some other way. In Hegel's interpretation of religious practices, consciousness' own essence turns out to be in truth *spirit*, or the spiritual community and its concrete practices that provide consciousness with an orientation, hence allowing it to become 'certain of itself.' What is taken for granted by the members of spiritual communities – the fundamental assumption about their own essence that Hegel claims cannot be the product of deception or delusion on another's part – is that these communities merit the trust that they place in them.

Hegel's denial of the possibility of deception at this foundational level is compatible with his affirmation that a people can be deceived about many things, even about things that are produced by spirit. This makes his answer to the 'academy' question importantly qualified. Here a secular example might be helpful. As Hegel himself notes, I can be made to believe that this coin is gold instead of copper, or that this bill is genuine instead of counterfeit. But could I be made to believe that coins or bills are valuable? Specific currencies are valuable because they are deemed to be valuable by those who treat them as such. This seems to be an uncontroversial view of money, one that is reflected in the way that I treat money in everyday life. In fact, money fits the three criteria for 'essence' that I have previously outlined, for it is an object constituted by and at the same time independent of consciousness, as well as one in which the community places its trust.[38] It might not be as centrally

38 If someone were to say, 'the paper on which money is printed is worthless,' we would think that this person is confused about what a currency is, which is established by convention.

important to a community as its religious doctrines, but it is nonetheless a part of the nexus of practices that make up what counts as common sense and that constitute a community as a community. So Hegel's claim would be that the community cannot become deceived about its monetary practices as such, though it can be deceived about particular instances of these practices (specific coins or bills).

This qualification goes a long way toward making Hegel's position plausible, but I think that his position needs to be qualified one step further. It could sound as if Hegel were defending the view that it is impossible to be *mistaken* about one's own essence, namely, that those who are 'certain' of themselves in relation to an essence possess infallible knowledge of this essence. I want to push back on this assumption by distinguishing between two claims: (1) that I cannot be deceived about my essence, and (2) that I cannot be mistaken about my essence. According to my reading of Hegel's argument, he is claiming only that a people cannot be deceived, not that it cannot be mistaken.

In explaining what being mistaken could mean in this context, one option would be to say the following: although I cannot be deceived into believing that money is valuable in light of a monetary standard of value, I could be mistaken in believing money to be valuable in the sense of 'good for my community,' that is, according to an alternative standard of value. Or it is possible that the practice of worshipping an absolute being is on a deeper level misguided, because it has turned out to be a bad idea to constitute communities around religious representations, even if this does not seem to be Hegel's own view.[39] Or it is possible to confuse religious representations with the kind of knowledge of which Hegel thinks only philosophy is capable, namely, conceptual comprehension. Religious representations could then be criticized for failing to take stock of their own limits when compared to knowledge in this higher sense.[40]

I favor a different option, according to which it is the very same aspect of essence about which I cannot be deceived and about which I can be mistaken. As I mentioned, Hegel argues that knowledge of one's essence includes a background assumption, namely, that the practices in which I place my trust are worthy of perpetuation. When I participate in religious rituals, for example, I take for granted that these are expressions of a genuinely spiritual community, and so I take for granted that they ought to be perpetuated. Hegel thinks that no one could deceive me into believing that these practices are worthy of my trust when they are not.

39 Looking ahead to the *Philosophy of Right*, in PR § 270R Hegel comments on the continued role of religion, which suggests that he does not want to eliminate religious practices from a rational state.
40 This comes closer to Hegel's own critique of religion in the *Phenomenology of Spirit.* In that text, he ranks religious forms of knowledge lower than philosophical (or 'absolute') knowledge. See, for example, PS ¶788.

This would be to assume that someone knows better than I do and so is in a position to fool me into this false belief. Hegel's criticisms of pure insight suggest that he does not accept that there can be such an external point of view on these practices, a perspective outside of spirit. But Hegel thinks it is possible that I and my contemporaries are mistaken in deeming them trustworthy, which is an assumption internal to the practice in question. It is a significant feature of Hegel's view that he is not ruling out that I could be making a mistake in making this assumption.

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is ridden with examples of errors about essences. At every major transition in this text, what was once taken to be a community's essence is revealed to have been based on a misconception. It seems to me that Hegel must leave such room for errors about essences because his philosophical method in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* denies that there could be a form of knowledge that is in principle infallible: if I am operating under a conception of knowledge according to which it is inconceivable how I could get an object wrong, then it is also inappropriate to speak about my getting the object right, which means that we are no longer in a context in which a relation of knowing obtains.[41]

Hegel's method also suggests that when it comes to alleged errors about something as foundational as one's own essence, we gain the distance that is needed in order to identify them as errors *through hindsight*, that is, at a point in time when this essence has become transformed into another. In other words, I am only able to identify the fundamental ways in which I have been misguided when a given shape of spirit is no longer pervasive, and a new spirit of the community has taken its place. This line of thought even provides an additional reason for denying that I can be deceived by another: if it is indeed the case that I am too close to my own mistakes to be able to identify them as mistakes, this is going to hold also for my contemporaries, so for anyone who might bother to try to deceive me. This aspect of Hegel's overall method applies to his discussion of the Enlightenment, in which external forms of deception are at stake. In this first answer to the 'academy' question, Hegel addresses the charge that it is a group of priests who are deceiving the people and manipulating them into false beliefs. Hegel answers that such external deception is impossible because a people's essence is not a possible object of deception, even if could turn out to be an object of error.

41 I take this to be one of the lessons of 'Sense-Certainty,' since Sense-Certainty cannot account for error and so cannot maintain the difference between what an object is in-itself and what it is for-consciousness (PS ¶110). But this lesson is already implied by Hegel's delineation of his method in the Introduction (PS ¶86).

5 Philosophy of Right

I now turn to the passage from the *Philosophy of Right* in which Hegel provides the second version of his answer:

> A great spirit has put forward the question for a public competition, *whether it is permissible to deceive a people.* One had to answer that a people does not let itself be deceived about its substantial foundation (*substantielle Grundlage*), the essence (*Wesen*) and specific character of its spirit, but that it is deceived by itself (*von sich selbst getäuscht*) about the manner in which it knows this character, and about how it according to this manner judges its actions, events, etc. (PR § 317)[42]

By the time he wrote this passage, Hegel lived in Berlin, the capital of Prussia and the city in which the Prussian Academy was based, during the restoration, a time known for an increase in state censorship. In this passage, Hegel alludes explicitly to the 'academy' question and this great spirit, Frederick II, repeating the formulation, *whether it is permissible to deceive a people.*[43] Even though written under different circumstances, the two passages have a lot in common. Here too Hegel qualifies his denial that it is possible to deceive a people by stating that this pertains only to the essence of a people, spelled out in terms of the substantial foundation and the specific character of a people's spirit. In this way Hegel leaves room for other conceivable objects of deception, even though he does not list them.

There are two amendments that set this passage apart from the answer Hegel gave in the *Phenomenology*. For one, Hegel claims that a people "does not let itself" to be deceived (*sich nicht täuschen lasse*), which is not identical to saying that it is impossible to deceive a people (*es unmöglich ist, zu täuschen*). The two cases are not identical because the second passage suggests a reason for this impossibility, namely, a people's resistance to attempts at deception. For another, Hegel is introducing an option he did not previously consider, namely, that of *self-deception*. He is overtly contrasting not two conceivable objects of deception, but two ways of being deceived, either by another or by oneself (*von sich selbst*).

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42 I altered the Nisbet translation. Here is the German in full: "Ein großer Geist hat die Frage zur öffentlichen Beantwortung aufgestellt, *ob es erlaubt sei, ein Volk zu täuschen*. Man musste antworten, dass ein Volk über seine substantielle Grundlage, das *Wesen* und bestimmten Character seines Geistes sich nicht täuschen lasse, aber über die Weise, wie es diesen weiß, und nach dieser Weise seine Handlungen, Ereignisse, u. s. f. beurteilt – *von sich selbst* getäuscht wird."

43 This passage has received more scholarly attention. See Moyar (forthcoming) as well as Ng (2021, 235–238), who provides a detailed reading of the passage. This is how Popper renders Hegel's point: "If the lie was successful, then it was no lie, since the People was not deceived concerning its substantial basis" (Popper 1971, 65).

At first sight, Hegel's characterization of deception in reflexive terms is unsurprising.[44] On one reading of the *Philosophy of Right,* Hegel explores a variety of self-conceptions, including that of rights bearer, moral subject, family member, and economic agent, among others.[45] Given that these self-conceptions are self-ascribed, it seems reasonable to think that we could not be deceived about them by another. How would someone go about fooling me into believing that I have a different self-conception than I do? This denial would be consistent with allowing the possibility that I am mistaken about my identity in the sense of being mistaken about who I *really* am. But Hegel's notion of self-deception is not as straightforward as it may initially seem.

First, is Hegel identifying being mistaken about an identity with deceiving oneself with respect to it? Can the relevant errors that emerge within the *Philosophy of Right* be redescribed as cases of self-deception? Given what we said about errors in the *Phenomenology*, it seems to be important that we distinguish between two kinds of failure: (1) a failure to know something that is objectively the case, but that one was not in a position to find out; and (2) a failure to be honest with oneself about something that one does (or at least could) in principle know. The category of error includes those which I could not have avoided making, because the relevant information was not then available to me – the time was not yet ripe for the needed discovery of the ways in which I have been fundamentally misguided. As I put it above, for me to gain the needed distance, a given shape of spirit would have to have changed. But self-deception implies that I am responsible for my own mistake, not simply because I jumped to a conclusion before I had all the facts, but because I withheld them from myself. I did not just fall into a faultless error, I deceived myself into it. This suggests a strong degree of involvement on my part.

Second, how are we to understand the subject that deceives itself? Is self-deception a matter of lying to oneself, misinforming oneself, or concealing information from oneself? Although the analogy between lying to another and deceiving oneself has its intuitive appeal, such a conception of self-deception generates seemingly irresolvable dilemmas. The phenomenon of lying is predicated on a difference between the person who knows some truth and the person who does not know this truth and is therefore susceptible to the lie. If I am lying to myself, it must be the case that I both know and not know a truth. But if I do know it, how can I successfully hide it from myself? Would I not immediately see through my own ruse? And if I do not know it, in what sense am I deceiving myself? Would it not just be

44 Kobe describes this reference to self-deception as "in a typically Hegelian manner" (Kobe 2019, 176)

45 These self-conceptions can be seen as expressions of what Hegel calls the "free will" (PR § 5–7).

a matter of plain ignorance? If this notion of a self-inflicted lie forces us into a dilemma, it suggests that it might be better to abandon the analogy between deceiving oneself and lying to another.

If we take a closer look at our passage, we find that Hegel is making a highly restricted claim. Hegel is not saying that a people deceives itself with respect to the very object about which he denied a people could be deceived by another. If he were making such a claim, we could resolve the apparent dilemma that arises in the individual case by allowing for the possibility that in cases of collective self-deception some people are deceiving others, hence dividing the roles of deceiver and deceived between distinct parties.[46] Instead, Hegel states that a people deceives itself about the *manner* in which it knows its essence. He is thus unequivocal about the fact that a people does indeed know its own essence. Rather, the target of its self-deception is this knowledge itself, specifically how we know. This allows Hegel to maintain that self-deception involves simultaneous knowing and not knowing at two distinct levels in one and the same subject: even if I know my essence, I can deceive myself about the way in which I know it, and so at the same time fail to know how I know this essence. What seems to be crucial here is that our failure to know the manner of our own knowledge is not comparable to a failure to know some object. If it is the case that I do know my own essence, the way I know it would presumably be available to me, so I must be the source of my own failure to know how I know.

Here too it is instructive to examine the context in which Hegel's answer to the 'academy' question appears. This passage is embedded in a chapter on the internal constitution of a rational state, in particular on the role of public opinion in its successful functioning. This suggests that Hegel has shifted his attention to a context that is more explicitly political than the one he had previously considered. It also suggests that Hegel now describes a relation to essence that is more reflective than that of religious faith, which was characterized by immediate self-certainty. Although Hegel holds that a rational state relies on a level of unreflective trust, he grants that many aspects of a people's essence can come up for review. This represents a transformation in perspective that Hegel associates with modern ethical life, specifically with the emergence of subjective freedom (PR, 22).

By 'public opinion,' Hegel means the sum total of judgments on matters of universal concern formed in the public setting of estate assemblies among other

46 By contrast, Pippin argues that collective 'self-deceit' can accommodate a division of labor between deceiver and deceived. According to Pippin, collective 'self-deceit' "consists in a disconnect between consciously held principles of action and the actual actions that result," which makes collective self-deceit irreducible to the sum total of individual cases of self-deception (Pippin 2018, 183).

venues. These estate assemblies are organized by the representatives of each estate (*Stand*). Hegel thinks of public opinion formation as a process that grants individuals a restricted say in political life, constrained by the setting in which it takes place, but also as a process in which one "ingenious idea" can devour another (PR § 315A).[47] For him, public opinion formation is closely connected to the right to free speech and the right to a free press, though he suggests that it is the publicity of public opinion formation that keeps the other two in check.[48] But Hegel does not assume that this mutual devouring of one opinion by another will proceed rationally, which means that he considers public opinion a collection of haphazardly formed judgments. This is hardly the rosy vision of public reason that the agents of the Enlightenment wanted to proliferate.

Yet Hegel is not wholly dismissive of the role of public opinion formation in a rational state. On the positive side, he argues that estate assemblies provide individuals with the opportunity to air views about the ways in which political figures are doing their jobs, hence establishing the conditions for the exercise of formal subjective freedom (PR § 316). He also argues that estate assemblies have the value of training those virtues and skills required of official bodies and civil servants, and of getting others to care about them and to expect them from their representatives (PR § 315). These are benefits of public opinion formation from a political point of view.

We can also think about public opinion as valuable in a further sense when we read Hegel's account of it in relation to the 'academy' question in the *Philosophy of Right*. I pointed out that Hegel puts his answer in terms of a people not *letting itself* be deceived, implying that a people resists attempts at deception. It is not farfetched to claim that a people resists these attempts precisely by forming public opinions. In the process of public opinion formation, a people would subject anyone who tries to fool them, primarily political figures, to public scrutiny. Because public opinion formation can play such an emancipatory role, Hegel grants it a place in the life of a rational state.

On the negative side, Hegel expresses serious reservations about public opinion. For him, public opinion consists in the "particular opinions of the many" in contrast to an articulation of what a people as a people truly knows (PR § 316). This makes public opinion, in Hegel's words, a "manifest self-contradiction, an appearance of cognition; in it, the essential is just as immediately present as the inessential" (PR § 316). Hegel's reservations stem from public opinion's relation to the essence on

47 This is not a democratic decision-making process, which Hegel strongly opposes (PR § 308).
48 See PR § 319 and § 319R. Hegel argues that public opinion formation will ensure that opinions voiced in the press will be harmless, because they will have been subjected to mature insight.

the basis of which it is formed. He thinks that public opinion is derived from the essence, or a people's substantial foundation, and answerable to it, but that it also distorts and betrays it. Here is how he describes this process:

> Public opinion therefore embodies not only the eternal and substantial principles of justice – the true content and product of the entire constitution and legislation and of the universal condition in general – in the form of *common sense* (*der gesunde Menschenverstand*) (the ethical foundation which is present in everyone in the shape of prejudices), but also the true needs and legitimate tendencies of actuality. – As soon as this inner content attains consciousness and is represented (*zur Vorstellung kommt*) in general propositions [...] all the contingencies of opinion, with its ignorance and perverseness, its false information and its errors of judgment, come on the scene. (PR § 317)

According to this passage, public opinion possesses a "true content" to the extent that it articulates insights and principles available to common sense. Although Hegel sometimes uses the phrase 'common sense' pejoratively, here it refers to the common ground shared by a people that remains for the most part in the background and is present in everyone as 'prejudices' (or pre-judgments). He contrasts common sense with the judgments of which public opinion is comprised, which also includes expressions of true needs and legitimate tendencies. But in the transition from common sense to public opinion, something often goes awry. As soon as this 'inner content' becomes *consciously represented*, "all the contingencies of opinion, with its ignorance and perverseness, its false information, and its errors of judgment come on the scene." What this passage suggests is that public opinion is objectionable because it is a species of conscious representation, and for this reason a potentially misleading expression of the insights that common sense is truly tracking. This concern about public opinion is in keeping with Hegel's recurring criticism of representational thinking, which he consistently contrasts with a conceptual or philosophical comprehension that would be capable of doing justice to this essential content.

In one of the Additions, Hegel provides an example that can illustrate the two modes of relating to one's own 'essence,' a term to which he alludes in PR § 317. One mode is that of a political disposition, which Hegel describes as a background trust of the state. This corresponds roughly to common sense. The other mode is that of representational thought, which 'fastens on to details' and 'delights in the vanity of claiming superior insight.' This corresponds roughly to opinion (public or otherwise). Hegel writes:

> They trust that the state will continue to exist and that particular interests can be fulfilled within it alone; but habit blinds us to the basis of our entire existence. It does not occur to someone who walks the streets in safety at night that this might be otherwise, for this habit of [living in] safety has become second nature, and we scarcely stop to think that it is solely the

> effect of particular institutions. Representational thought often imagines that the state is held together by force; but what holds it together is simply the basic sense of order which everyone possess. (PR § 268A)

As he did in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel here once again appeals to the attitude we display toward that which has the status of our essence, in this context the state. This person is not thinking about the state, though we could say that his behavior shows that he knows the state to be his own essence. But if this person were to represent this substantial foundation to himself, he becomes tempted to "imagine that the state is held together by force," an image that depends on a sharp distinction between the subject and object. Hegel suggests that such an opinion stands in contrast to what this person does indeed know while walking in safety, namely, that the state is held together by a basic and pervasive sense of order to which he himself contributes.

Because Hegel's discussion of public opinion functions as a prelude to his answer to the 'academy' question, it provides a context for disambiguating its allusion to self-deception and clarifying what it is that a people can deceive itself about. The following position comes into view: Hegel thinks that I do know the essence before I come to form an opinion about an essential matter in a public setting. But when I make this essence into an object of conscious representation, I am led to distort or betray it. Conscious representations can never fully capture this essence, not because they are *conscious*, but because they are *representations*. According to Hegel, representational thinking misrepresents the relationship between subject and object, producing for example an image of an object as something wholly distinct from me. But Hegel does not take representational thinking to be inevitably self-deceived about the way in which it falls short of what we know in the mode of common sense. As we have seen in his discussion of religious faith, there are indeed species of representational thinking that Hegel takes to be more or less innocuous, despite their formal shortcomings. So what is it about public opinion formation that fosters self-deception?

Hegel makes two suggestions. The first suggestion concerns a worry inspired by the etymology of the word 'opinion' (*Meinung*): what is *mine*, what *I mean*. Hegel notes that public opinions tend to be fervently asserted, which suggests that those asserting them take themselves to be serious about the truth. But fervor is no criterion of truth. On the contrary, it often indicates that I am more concerned to express my own unique view on a matter than to stay true to that which is already widely known as common sense.[49] Hegel remarks that "the last thing which opinion can

49 I am emphasizing 'mineness' as a structural feature of opinion as such, but there are social conditions that exacerbate this focus on the individual at the expense of the community. De Boer 2018 and Ng 2021 have both discussed public opinion as an expression of "particular interests." On

be made to realize is that its seriousness is not serious at all" (PR § 317). This remark specifies what it is that people are motivated to conceal from themselves, namely, the fact that their opinions do not reflect a serious commitment to the truth.

The second suggestion concerns a different limitation internal to public opinion formation. Hegel claims not just that common sense is an instance of genuine knowledge, but also that it continues to inform our judgments. His point is that no process of public opinion formation can make all aspects of essence simultaneously explicit, turning all prejudices into judgments in one fell swoop. When I participate in public debates, I continue to rely on a common ground that is not being debated by me and my interlocutors. We can think of many examples, even some from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.[50] For instance, Hegel takes for granted that all participants in estate assemblies will be male citizens, paradigmatically heads of households (PR § 171). Even if he thinks he has an argument in favor of this restriction on political participation, this argument is based in part on background assumptions about men and women that Hegel saw no reason to interrogate.[51] So, Hegel in effect both exemplifies and admits that the activity of 'giving and asking for reasons' will never be fully self-transparent. But because it seems to compromise the integrity of this process, those who participate in public opinion formation are motivated to conceal from themselves that they continue to rely on common sense.

These two suggestions shed light on Hegel's reference to self-deception in his second version of an answer to the 'academy' question. As we have seen, Hegel maintains his earlier thesis that a people knows its own essence in a way that is invulnerable to deception. But Hegel also suggests that I deceive myself into believing that I am capturing this essence when I am expressing my opinion, all the while concealing from myself (1) my preference for that which sets me apart, and (2) my continued reliance on common sense. So, there is something about the very structure of public opinion formation that promotes self-deception. What I am self-deceived *about*, however, is not the essence itself, but the fact that I already know the essence in the form of common sense.

In the context of the *Phenomenology,* I argued that we need to distinguish between deceptions and mistakes. It seems to me that in the *Philosophy of Right*, a

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their view, public opinion is potentially harmful to the community as a whole because it is fostered by members of interest groups, primarily the estates. De Boer extends this criticism to religious leaders and their religious interests (De Boer 2018, 143).

50 Consider an example from Warnke 2018 of the debates in the Virginia House of Delegates in 1831–1832 about the abolition of slavery. Warnke notes that even those who were arguing in favor of abolishing slavery were doing so in distorted terms, because all those who participated in the discussion were relying on prejudices that this deliberative process did not bring up for review.

51 See, for example, PR § 166.

similar qualification is in order. Despite the fact that Hegel privileges common sense over public opinion, Hegel is not implying that common sense is beyond reproach, or that public opinion is powerless to correct it. In particular, Hegel is not ruling out that I could be wrong to place my trust in the state I inhabit. He is also not ruling out that others might be able to draw my attention to this. Although he argues that it is the state's *rationality* that is on full display in examples like walking in safety at night, it seems to me that he leaves open the very real possibility of error in a way that is at least comparable to the shapes of spirit in the *Phenomenology*. When he warns in the Preface that philosophy is its own time grasped in thoughts, he is admitting that it is inevitably constrained by a historical framework. This suggests that this knowledge of one's substantial foundation is maybe better thought of not as the achievement of a firm state, but as an ongoing process that includes contestation and revision. To see how this might play out, just take a second look at Hegel's highly telling example: who exactly is feeling comfortable during their nightly strolls, and who is excluded from Hegel's account?

6 Conclusion

We can now take stock of what Hegel's answer to the 'academy' question tells us about his arguments in these two texts as well as his attitude toward the stakes of the official essay contest. My main aim in the paper has been to provide a reconstruction of his answer with an eye to what he means by a people's essence, that is, the object with respect to which the idea of deception supposedly falls away.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel addresses the historical setting in which the 'academy' question was first posed by examining the case of religious faith and asking whether the essence of faith could have been a product of large-scale deception. Representatives of 'pure insight' charged priests with deceiving the people in some wholesale way, namely, by convincing them to believe in an absolute being. Hegel argues that this charge is off the mark, for a people cannot be deceived about that which orients a spiritual community, something in which they place their trust. Faith makes use of conscious representations in the form of religious imagery, which means that it is not presenting this essence in an undisguised or uncovered form. But Hegel does not dismiss these representations as deceptions. Although he does not quite put it in these terms, faith for him is an expression of common sense, which Hegel takes to mean that a people possesses an invulnerable yet not infallible insight into a spiritual community's essential practices.

In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel shifts focus to an explicitly political context and considers the question of whether a people could be deceived, now presumably

by politicians rather than priests, even if political and religious forms of authority were deeply entwined in his time. Here as well, he asserts that a people does know its own essence. But in this context, he states in no uncertain terms that a people knows its own essence in the shape of common sense rather than public opinion, which is a species of conscious representation. It is striking that in both contexts Hegel is grappling with the limitations of representational thinking, since he maintains that representations are not well equipped to capture a people's essence, especially when compared with a conceptual comprehension of which only philosophy is truly capable. But the answer he provides in the *Philosophy of Right* suggests that not all representations are equally innocuous. Even if representations do not and cannot compromise this knowledge of essence that Hegel thinks remains immune to deception, they can generate self-deception, specifically a self-inflicted failure to know how we know. Hegel suggests that this danger is especially pronounced in public opinion formation.

What do these arguments tell us about Hegel's own attitude toward the Enlightenment project? When taken together, the two versions of his answer to the 'academy' question attest to his continued ambivalence in this regard. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel casts faith as too uncomplicated to survive critical scrutiny, but he also criticizes the representatives of 'pure insight' for misconstruing their opponent, thereby attacking a straw man. In the *Philosophy of Right*, this attitude becomes focused on public opinion, which on the one hand provides an opportunity for the public exercise of reason, but on the other hand leads to forms of self-deception that make public opinion appear to be independent from the essential practices of a people. Hegel's answer thus has broader implications for his own aims in the *Philosophy of Right* and beyond, for it indicates that Hegel did not see himself in the role of someone who has to 'enlighten' his readers. If a people's own essence is not a possible object of deception, then it also cannot be an appropriate object for enlightenment.

Rather, Hegel's target is the self-deception to which the production of representations can give rise. As we have seen, representations are woven into the practices of spiritual communities, formed in settings as vastly different as religious ceremonies and estate assemblies. This allows us to appreciate Hegel's challenge not as one of disseminating the truth about essence, but as one of combating the threat of self-deception in relation to it. In the end, however, Hegel concedes that it is excruciatingly difficult to know the truth as philosophy seeks to do – in its uncovered and undisguised form – and he accommodates our limitations by leaving behind a series of images not unlike the 'myths' and 'fables' that troubled Frederick and his contemporaries: the absolute as the night in which all cows are black (PS ¶16), the truth as the revel in which no member is not drunk (PS ¶47), and philosophy as the owl of Minerva that spreads its wings at dusk (PR, 21).

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