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Forms of Life: Freedom and Inertia in Rahel Jaeggi's *Progress and Regression*

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Abstract: Rahel Jaeggi says of her book: “The Hegelian idea of a dialectically self-enriching experiential learning process thus emerges as central to the entire project.” I examine and compare Jaeggi’s own uptake of Hegelian themes and consider them in light of her acceptance of Philip Kitcher’s distinction between ‘progress from’ and ‘progress towards’ conceptions of progress. Although there are some obvious differences between Jaeggi’s and Hegel’s conception of progress, I conclude by arguing that her way of taking things gets at the deeper roots of Hegel’s views as a non-teleological conception of history that brings into relief what is immanent to human agency.

Keywords: Hegel; freedom; *Geist*; dialectic; Jaeggi; transformative experience

It’s hard to argue with Rahel Jaeggi’s book, *Progress and Regression* when you find that you basically agree with almost all of its key points. Besides, the book is rich, detailed, and its footnotes alone could fuel an industry itself working on developments of the themes in it. It is a book on political philosophy that quite obviously brings into view the political, moral and existential dilemmas that the twenty-first century has thrust upon us. What I am going to do here is look into what I take to be the really central issue of her proposal which is the philosophy of history it draws upon and its relation to the very idea of moral progress. I shall then touch very briefly on the idea of regression as it plays out in her account.

1 Progress? Who Still Believes in Progress?

The twenty-first century began with what seemed at the time to be a clear view of itself and with an equally clear view of what were the problems facing it were. The

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Cold War was over, and the countries by and large in NATO were too busy congratulating themselves on their collective wisdom to note the storm clouds gathering. In that respect, it resembled the optimism that the end of the nineteenth century as it segued into the twentieth century. J. M. Keynes spoke of living in the period between the Belle Epoque until the first world war as existence within an “economic Eldorado, in this economic Utopia,” in which “life offered, at a low cost and with the least trouble, conveniences, comforts, and amenities beyond the compass of the richest and most powerful monarchs of other ages.”¹ To note that European life staged a regression after the Belle Epoque to the Second World War only understates the case.

However, once again, after the catastrophes of the Great Depression and the horrors of the Second World War, the advanced economies of the world at first seemed to have learned the lessons from their own forms of regression, and what are now called the ‘glorious thirties’ of the Western world between 1945 and 1975 gave an underpinning to that faith. It was only barely noted that Franklin Roosevelt’s ‘Four Freedoms’ – of speech, of worship, from fear, and from want – were quickly and subtly changed by Harry Truman into ‘Three Freedoms’ with ‘Free Enterprise’ replacing freedom from want and freedom from fear. The nascent social democracy of the New Deal in the USA was quietly replaced by what Lizabeth Cohen called ‘the consumer republic’ (Cohen 2003).

After the ‘glorious thirties’ withered after 1975 (for reasons still disputed),² the consumer republic lived on, and the twenty-first century began as various economic and academic elites extolled the unfolding of yet another economic Eldorado in the form of a neoliberal world order in which wealth would, so many of its cheerleaders told, be ever increasing. At the end of the twentieth century, so it was said, history was supposed to be ending (and of all things, Hegel was given credit for it). Wealth did indeed increase (at least globally), but history, instead of fading away, became ever more insistent on taking a completely different path. Growing inequality spurred on by that growth in wealth accompanied by climate disasters, economic collapses, and the growing anomie in capitalist societies threw cold water on any belief in ‘progress’ (even though it remained as an idea put forward by President Obama in the early days of his administration). Belief in progress and being on the ‘right side’ of history all began to look like rather hollow pronouncements.

By the turn of the century, historians had already taken to warning each other and their graduate students against ‘presentism’ – reading the past in term of

¹ Cited in Carter 2020a, 2020b. The cite comes from Keynes 1919, 8–9. Keynes also made it clear that he was referring only to certain elevated classes in London at the time, but the point remains the same.

² See the widely discussed book, Gerstle 2022.

present-day values and anxieties – so that any appeal to ‘progress’ even in terms of the supposedly great arc of history bending to justice had to be not only naïve but maybe even counter-productive. For various versions of the left – communist, left-liberal, socialist, social democratic – this looked particularly disquieting since so much of the progressive ethos had tied itself to some version or another of history having a special kind of unstoppable arc such that even when things weren’t going their way, the belief in being on the right side of history – ‘progress’ – could keep that faith. There was only one correct way forward and going back was simply out of the question. In light of what seemed to be the failure of that form of ideology, various thinkers have turned against the very idea of progress itself, noting especially how belief in progress had a negative underside, namely, in the view that non-European peoples were somehow fundamentally ‘behind’ in following out the arc. ‘Progress,’ so it came to be thought, was not only empty, it was even one of the systematic ways in which Europeans had put a justificatory gloss on their colonial projects of domination. Not merely did ‘progress’ look like a naïve concept, it also began to look rather insidious in the way it had manifested itself.

2 Back to Hegel?

One of Jaeggi’s main points is that the idea of progress as an unstoppable force (even if the arc is indeed long) should have no place in our scheme for thinking of how moral, ethical and political life might be better. Instead, she proposes a Hegelian understanding of history as progressive. As she puts it, “[t]he Hegelian idea of a dialectically self-enriching experiential learning process thus emerges as central to the entire project” (Jaeggi 2025, 35). Now, Hegel is often (maybe even usually) taken as the poster child for the idea that history is both progressive, unstoppable and that non-Europeans have fallen way short, maybe even irretrievably, of such progress. Hegel is also often taken to subscribe to the view that not only does history have a goal, that goal can be known beforehand and it can provide as it were a metric for judging various historical periods in terms of how close or far away they are in terms of the metric of freedom. Jaeggi’s version of Hegel subscribes to none of those tropes (and rightfully so in my opinion). What emerges from her view is a new Hegel, informed by Frankfurt Critical Theory and modern history with a distinctly John-Deweyesque shape to it.³

Nonetheless, there remains a powerful picture of the relation between agency and history such that even if one jettisoned the older metaphysics of all kinds

³ See also Kitcher 2020. On the deep relation between Hegel, and Dewey, as I see it, see Pinkard 2026.

that was supposed to underlay the idea of progress, there remained the idea that one nonetheless simply had to have some kind of prior conception of the good towards which progress was aiming and especially if one was to be in the position of saying that anything at all counted as progress. This itself is part of a more general view that in ethics, one either has to have some conception of a good or the good that one must presuppose in advance of making any judgments as to whether something is ethically better than something else. That ‘good’ might be the principle of utility, the categorical imperative, human flourishing, the cultivation of virtue or whatever else, but it must be ‘prior’ and thus in some sense of the term ‘objective.’ The alternative on that view of the matter is relativism or even nihilism.

Hegel was no relativist or nihilist – he states, for example, that “The laws of ethics are not contingent, for they are the rational itself” (Hegel 1975, 94; Hegel and Hoffmeister 1994, 112) – but he did not believe that there was an independent good outside of history. There are goods that count as objective, but they must first be worked out in historical time as emerging out of various historical conjunctures and crises. His view was developmental and dialectical, holding that new formations of social life and thought are generated out of the tensions and contradictions involved in the very basic ways that self-conscious life individually and collectively deals with the problems confronting it, and in that respect, Jaeggi and Hegel stand on the same ground. When Hegel says that the history of the world consists of the ways in which what he calls *Geist*, ‘*spirit*’ (which he identifies with the more intuitive concept of self-conscious life⁴) finds itself confronted with problems, “and the solution of its problem creates new problems for it to solve, so that it multiplies the materials on which it operates. Thus, we see how *Geist* in history issues forth in innumerable directions, indulging and satisfying itself in them all ... Each of the creations in which it found temporary satisfaction presents itself in turn as a new material, challenging *Geist* to develop it further still.” (Hegel 1975, 33; Hegel and Hoffmeister 1994, 36).

Once again, Hegel and Jaeggi stand on the same ground. History is a problem-solving affair in which self-conscious life learns certain things and builds on them. However, it is also a self-undermining and self-renewing development. Hegel thought of these as forms of life (or shapes of life, depending on how one translates

4 Hegel states that “spirit is the being-for-itself of conscious and *self-conscious life* with all the feelings, ideas, and aims of this conscious existence” (Hegel, 1988, 714; translation altered and italicizing added by me; Hegel 1969a, 1969b, 367: “Denn die Seele ist nur dieses ideelle einfache Fürsichsein des Leiblichen als Leiblichen, der Geist aber das Fürsichsein des bewußten und selbstbewußten Lebens mit allen Empfindungen, Vorstellungen und Zwecken dieses bewußten Daseins.”; Italicizing by me).

‘*Gestalt des Lebens*’⁵) taking on relatively stable formations until the basic tensions and contradictions within it became too great – when it reached a point of crisis – after which the form of life collapsed in on itself only to be succeeded by another form of life that incorporated what still worked in the older form and integrated that into itself to produce a new and distinct form of life.

Like Jaeggi, Hegel thought that the kind of objective goods that are at stake in ethical life have to appear not merely as constructions but as immanent to self-conscious life itself. Jaeggi takes this as something that precipitates from out of our problem-solving capacities that shape our individual and collective lives even though it need not have any aim specified in advance. Hegel likewise thinks that there is a logic to all these changes having to do with contradictions in a form of life that basically starts at ground zero and which after three thousand years, *Geist* comes to comprehend that what it was trying to do all along was to understand what would be required for self-conscious life to achieve its basic aim, namely, freedom.⁶ Jaeggi seems to depart from Hegel here. But does she?

On Jaeggi’s proposal, we are to see history as in fact exhibiting progress, but it has no goal. Adapting Philip Kitcher’s pragmatist proposal that we distinguish ‘progress from’ and ‘progress towards,’ Jaeggi wants to cast her lot partially with the Kitcher-pragmatists. The more traditional teleological view of history sees it as a ‘progress toward’ a clear goal allowing all along the way for corrections while also keeping the goal fixed (as one might do on a journey; see Kitcher and Heilinger 2021). The pragmatist-Kitcher view on the other hand proposes to see history at least somewhat as a matter of problem-solving (as did Hegel). We have no clear goal towards which we are moving, but we do mark progress in finding solutions to some weighty problems that have appeared.

Jaeggi appropriates Hegel in much the same way Hegel thought that *Geist* appropriates its own past. She keeps what works and discards the remaining rubble. Inserting Hegel into the Kitcher-pragmatist picture, however, she proposes

5 See Hegel’s famous remark in Hegel 1991, where he says that “When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life (*Gestalt des Lebens*) has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk” (23).

6 Thus, Hegel says with reference to starting his philosophy of history from, as it were, ground zero, “We must merely note for the present that the spirit begins in a state of infinite potentiality – but no more than potentiality – which contains its absolute substance as something as yet implicit, as the object and goal which it only attains as the end result in which it at last achieves its realization.” (Hegel 1975, 131) He does think that the goal of history is to construct a political, religious and social order in which there is a actualization of freedom not just for some but for all, and in his memorable phrase, “World history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom – progress that we must recognize as necessary”, that is, that the freedom claimed by some can with all right be claimed by all, and which he identifies as the central tenet of the modern world.

that in key respects, progress is not just problem-solving in general but problem solving with respect to ‘forms of life.’ When a form of life breaks down under its own weight – that is, when it creates some really basic practical problems for itself that, using its own resources, it cannot resolve, and it becomes aware of this inability and sets itself to resolving the problems instead of replaying them over and over, then it is succeeded by something that can be regarded as genuine ‘progress’ (in terms of ‘progress from’).

3 Transformative Experience

This seems to be Jaeggi’s way of avoiding the by now much discussed idea of a transformative experience as an experience of some kind of crucial event in life that cannot in advance be anticipated and which change both one’s epistemic standpoint and one’s values (becoming a parent is one of the central examples in the literature). The idea is that you cannot know what it is going to be like (for example, to be a parent) until you have had the experience and thus the ability to make a rational choice about the matter beforehand cannot really or fully be there. Religious transformation is also often said to be similar.

However, although Jaeggi does not speak of transformative experiences per se, her book is rich in its discussion of experiences, and the notion of fundamental transformations is certainly central to her book. Instead, she speaks of transformation in Hegelian terms: “With Hegel, the increasingly adequate realization of an idea involves a transformative, self-enriching process of actualization in which something is not just brought to light and understood but takes shape, assumes concrete form, and thereby changes in the course of its realization.” (Jaeggi 2025, 69) Or, to put it a different way: Our concepts only take on their sense as they are put to use, and the abstract meaning of the concept develops into the concrete concept with an enrichment of its content. As Hegel himself puts it in own terms, “The shape which the concept assumes in its actualization, and which is essential for cognition of the concept itself, is different from its form of being purely as concept, and is the other essential moment of the Idea.” (Hegel 1991, §1, 25) The realization of an idea in practice – such as ‘equality’ being translated into concrete political terms – is not just a matter of making explicit something that was already there. It is a matter of taking a stance on how we are supposed to go on into the future with that concept.

Progress is thus not merely change for the better but *transformative* change for the better, which brings up the obvious question. Given Jaeggi’s commitment to a kind of holism about the social and the political, she would surely say that moral progress and social progress are linked together. What is transformed are *practices* (social, political, moral, economic, familial and such) which include all these

together in what she calls an ‘ensemble’ (echoing Gramsci and also perhaps Sartre), a kind of totality encompassing lots of different totalities within itself that also themselves function as ensembles. But what counts as a ‘transformative’ change for the better or worse? She notes at one point that a transformative change is “more aptly described as a paradigm shift from intelligibility to unintelligibility than as a refutation within the sphere of the intelligible. What has changed is not how this or that practice is evaluated but ... what is thinkable and unthinkable, that is, the whole gamut of what is normatively up for debate: the frame of reference of moral judgments.” (Jaeggi 2025, 85-6) The ‘thinkable versus unthinkable’ distinction refers to a quote from Marx where he says that in a higher economic and social formation, slavery (owning another person as property) would be ‘tasteless.’ Jaeggi renders ‘tastelessness’ to mean not simply deficient as an aesthetic category but flat out unintelligible: “it has become unintelligible against what, following Hegel, I call the ethical context of our lived practices, convictions, and institutions. Treating a human being as private property ... is a category mistake” (Jaeggi 2025, 35).

This seems a bit odd. Slavery is not unintelligible (as say, a category mistake like asking whether the number two is red or green). We know what it is, and it is not hard to come up with plausible accounts for why some might want to enslave others. It is, of course, out of the question to consider it as possibly justified in any way that would fit into our own ‘ethical context.’ The experience of something like moral horror that would be the reaction if, say, some public officials were to suggest that some group of people were perhaps, or just maybe, fit for or subject to modern slavery is not because of its unintelligibility. We would know perfectly well what they were suggesting. Nor is it a matter that if we actually tried to put it into practice, we couldn’t make sense of it. A society that forbids slavery might coexist next to one that practices slavery, but the former would not necessarily see the latter as being simply incomprehensible. Nor would a modern slave-owning society be mere “retrogression, a simple falling behind achieved standards.” (Hegel 1969b) Regression, at least in Jaeggi’s sense, has to do with a learning blockade, a failure both to come to terms with what needs to be done to solve the problem, a failure to comprehend that there needs to be a new way of approaching what it would mean to resolve the problem, but not a failure in metaphysical intelligibility.

This suggests another possibility, even a Hegelian-Deweyean one, of making sense of Marx’s concept of slavery as ‘tasteless.’ The sphere of the ethical (*Sittlichkeit*) is distinct from that of the moral since the moral is a legacy of the acceptance of an legislative picture of moral life which comes from the acceptance into ethical life of one or more of the great monotheistic religions: the one God as lawgiver. Historically, ‘morality’ became fundamentally conceived as a series of laws to which we are obligated, and its logic of obligation and obedience is tied at first to the concept of a divine legislator (since only such a divine legislator

could bind us to such obligations). That marked a transformational change from the ancient world which was a world of ethical life, and which thus followed not a logic of obligation but a logic of attraction as to what kind of life was best, both as collective and as individual life. The legalistic sense of obligation to laws was at first anchored and embedded in what an attractive and compelling mode of individual and collective life, but it gradually began to detach itself. Jaeggi certainly acknowledges something very much like this with her “tentative thesis about the dynamic of moral progress, namely that moral progress does not stand on its own, and the progress we think we can detect with regard to moral questions, narrowly conceived, is embedded in and reliant on social frameworks and background conditions ... Translated into Hegelian terms, morality is always rooted in ethical life, that is, in the historically specific practices and institutions in which we lead our social lives, and it is on this level that changes take place.” (Jaeggi 2025, 91)

Marx’s remark about the ‘tastelessness’ of slavery to our contemporary form of life is thus a remark about the utter repugnance to us of the idea of owning another person as property. Marx, like Hegel, is relying there on a logic of attraction, not the logic of intelligibility in terms of moral laws having to do with a logic of command and obligation. (This leaves aside worries about whether this is consistent with Marx’s other views.) That also suggests that at least one version of the concept of transformative change itself might not be a matter exclusively of *intelligibility* taken as a demarcation between sense and nonsense, but of something else, namely, a communally shared conception of better lives and a conception that some forms of communal life are simply out of the question.

4 Logics of Obligation and Logics of Attraction

Now, to many people, any appeal to a conception of a ‘logic of attraction’ is going to necessarily land one in the position of committing oneself to the idea that there can be no rational assessment of such attraction. As they say, *de gustibus non est disputandum*, which means that if some people find domineering violence attractive while others find peaceful cooperation more appealing, then there can be no rational resolution of the matter. However, this need not be the case. For the Hegelian conception of transformative change, the good that serves to justify the transformation appears only in the performance of the actions constructing the change itself. Jaeggi’s point is basically like that of Hannah Arendt in her accounts of action as a capacity for beginning that is rooted in natality: As Arendt put it, it is the

solution for the perplexities of beginning which needs no absolute to break the vicious circle in which all first things seem to be caught. What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself, or, to be more precise, that beginning

and principle, *principium* and principle, are not only related to each other, but are coeval. The absolute from which the beginning is to derive its own validity and which must save it, as it were, from its inherent arbitrariness is the principle which, together with it, makes its appearance in the world. (Arendt 1963, 214)⁷

The open-endedness of transformational change is like that of the way in which conceptual innovation cannot be predicted but must instead be made. The caveman (at least as he is featured in so many cartoons) cannot predict the invention of the wheel except by offering at least an imaginative depiction of what a wheel would do and what practical tasks it would be suited to carry out.

As an illustration of such a transformational change, we can consider the emergence of the concept of freedom in light of Hegel's own and famous account of the struggle for recognition and its resulting in the statuses of mastery and servitude. However, rather than use this space to analyze Hegel's account in all its intricacies (and, besides, almost anything one says about the relevant passages in Hegel's *Phenomenology* will be disputed by somebody somewhere, so the analysis would have to grow into book-length proportions), I will only give an overview of how this would count as one of the key examples of how new moral, ethical or political conceptions can be introduced that are not simply error corrections of prior ethical or political conceptions and which mark 'progress as transformative experience.'

Hegel's own discussion of such a transition takes off in an imaginative depiction of a world in which there is at least no history yet to be construed in terms of progress.⁸ Although one can with good reason take issue with Hegel on that point, here we need to step outside the Hegelian text to get a sense of what would have been at stake in making that move. After the ancient agricultural revolution, the ancient world itself became haunted by what has been called the Malthusian Trap, the tendency of all gains in productivity induced by new technological innovations to be seized by an elite, and in a world in which economic growth rates remained low to non-existent, the only way to accumulate enough of a surplus (and thus to be able to indulge in more 'noble' activities) was to extract the surplus from others, and the only way to do that was to use both ideology and violence to force the great majority to hand over a surplus to a more or less predatory elite.

⁷ The same point is made in 'What is Freedom?' in Arendt 2006.

⁸ This is how he introduces the topic in his 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, see Hegel and Pinkard 2018: "Self-Sufficiency and Non-Self-Sufficiency of Self-Consciousness; Mastery and Servitude," 108-17. In his later lectures on the philosophy of history, he remarks on how there is no real history prior to the struggles involving mastery and servitude: "These periods – whether we estimate them in centuries or millennia – which elapses in the life of nations before history came to be written, and which may well have been filled with a evolutions, migrations, and the most violent changes, have no objective history precisely because they have no subjective history, i.e., no historical narratives." (Hegel 1975, 136)

To go back to Hegel's account, two individuals make the same demand on the other that the other recognize their independence. This cannot be negotiated since the whole key to exercising independence as self-sufficiency is to have others be dependent on yourself such that their whole lives are lived in dependency on the independent member. The struggle ends either in the inconclusive death of both of them in the struggle or in one of them renouncing what had originally been a non-negotiable, absolute claim to independence and accepting their new status as dependent on the master.

We can see what was at stake here again in looking at the broader context of the discussion. In the ancient world, the practice of slavery was widespread. Extractive unpaid labor was necessary to a functioning economy in which an elite managed to live above a subsistence level and enjoy a life without the toil necessary for those destined for servitude. However, the adoption of slavery not merely as a practice but as a form of life for the slave states of antiquity – particularly, the various Greek Poleis – also made it possible for the Greeks to establish a more or less egalitarian political order; a democracy (at least for male citizens; as is well known, women, slaves, and foreigners were excluded).⁹ In the pre-democratic period, the difference between mastery and servitude was simply that of self-sufficiency as independence. The slaves were dependent on their masters, and the masters were at least normatively independent of the slaves. The masters had a claim on the lives of the slaves, and the slaves – human tools as Aristotle described them – had no claims against the masters. However, once the masters had coalesced into a democratic order, their mutual independence from each other became reconceived as freedom (*eleutheria*), the social position of not being at the beck and call of another (as the way Aristotle described the free person (Aristotle 1941, 1356).

Or, as Hannah Arendt put it (and better than Hegel): “To be free meant to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed.” (Arendt 1958, 33) No single adult male in the polis could compel another to be at his beck and call, but for all the male members of the polis to be in a position to be that kind of free person, there had to be others who were completely dependent on them. Freedom as growing out of independence as *Selbständigkeit*, self-sufficiency, was built on the backs of the slaves. In its idealized conception, the democratic Greek polis held together what seemed to be two opposed conceptions: That of individual self-sufficiency and that of the self-sufficiency of the polis. The Greek form of life, on Hegel's account formed instead a dialectical unity: the elements of the unity (individual self-sufficiency and

⁹ See Finley 1964; Patterson 1991.

communal self-sufficiency) were both analytically distinguishable from each other but not separable from each other.¹⁰

Failure to recognize the dialectical unity leads to the deficient view of the polis as an additive sum of self-sufficient agents or of the polis as self-sufficient and its agents being only parts of that whole. The truth of the matter is that neither the 'I' nor the 'We' can be reduced to the other. But as in all cases of dialectic, the individual moments of the whole (in this case, individual independence and the dependence of all on the unity of the polis) can threaten to pull apart, in which case the whole (the form of life itself) dissolves.

5 Freedom and the Malthusian Trap

This is one of Hegel's paradigmatic cases of how a new moral, political and social concept is construed out of what Hegel calls 'determinate negation.' Independence (as *Selbstständigkeit*) becomes reconstrued as freedom, although the difference between the two is at first hard to make out. 'Independence' is 'not a slave.' 'Freedom' is 'not a slave' but also 'having the status of participating in the polis.' In coming to use the new term, the slave comes to see a good that was not there before and now has a new object of aspiration: Not merely not to be a slave – to regain perhaps the independence he lost in the battle for recognition – but to be free, to have a standing in the political community. Creating this flawed democratic community gave the Greeks – especially the Athenians – a new advantage. The Greek efflorescence, as it has come to be called by some historians, meant that for several hundred years they not only escaped the Malthusian Trap by creating a new and dynamic economy based on a basically equally shared wealth (discounting of course the slaves) and a very attractive cultural world to go along with it.¹¹

This made 'freedom' a new concept and the shorthand for a very attractive form of life. But it remained undeveloped. In his own treatment of the concept in

¹⁰ Among the many places where Hegel makes this distinction, here is one: "These are therefore the two moments contained in logic. But they are now known to be inseparable, not as in consciousness, where each is also known as existing for itself; it is only because they are known at the same time as distinguished (but not existing for themselves) that their unity is not abstract, dead, and immobile, but concrete." These, then, are the two moments contained in logic. But they are now known to exist inseparably, not as in consciousness, where each exists *for itself*; it is for this reason and this reason alone, because they are at the same time known to be distinct (yet not to exist for themselves), that their unity is not abstract, dead and inert, but concrete." (Hegel and Di Giovanni 2010, 39).

¹¹ See the discussions in DeLong 2023; Goldstone 2002; Ober 2015. Goldstone argues that many other forms of life have at various points in history avoided the Malthusian trap. DeLong argues that it is never overcome for very long.

the *Phenomenology*, Hegel traced out very briefly how the concept developed out of this beginning as ‘independence as not being a slave’ into the conceptual devices of stoicism and skepticism as alternative conceptualizations of how to think of freedom-as-independence which themselves failed to work out and were replaced by a conception of agency as not particularly valuing freedom-as-independence at all but as nonetheless carrying on some of the concept (what he called ‘the unhappy consciousness’ as the consciousness of the efflorescence and the freedom it once thought it had achieved and its aspiration, however muted, to achieve it again in a different shape¹²).

The struggle for recognition thus is made intelligible and justifies itself in light of a concept that does not make its appearance except in the process of the kind of transformational change of which it is a component. But that is only part of the way this moment of progress develops. Hegel speaks of *Geist* – self-conscious life – as spinning a web for itself such that “here and there in this web (*in diesem Netze*) there are knots, more firmly tied than others, which give stability and direction to the life and consciousness of spirit; they owe their firmness and power simply to the fact that, having been brought before consciousness, they stand as independent concepts of its essential nature” (Hegel and Di Giovanni 2010, 17; Hegel 1969a, 1969b, 27). Freedom is one of the essential knots tied into the historical web. It is not there in the web before the Greeks construct it, but it becomes such a basic ‘knot’ that comes to be seen as giving a force and meaning to individual and collective life that it begins to be seen as the human essence itself, its highest object of aspiration. Before its introduction, nobody knew they were free or unfree (even though they certainly knew they might fall into servitude and end up at the beck and call of another who now owned them). Freedom was not some built-in metaphysical capacity to escape the bounds of natural causality but is rather a matter of self-consciousness. If you do not know that you are free, you are not free. (Hegel and Di Giovanni 2010, 17; Hegel 1969a, 1969b, 27)

However, the invention of this concept as the determinate negation of servitude – not just as ‘not a slave’ but as something else, ‘freedom’ which was also ‘not a slave’ – ended up, in Hegel’s conception of progress, becoming the fundamental aspiration of self-conscious life itself. Freedom first enters into *Geist*’s web not as

12 See Hegel and Pinkard 2018, ¶353, 206: “However, once self-consciousness has attained this happy fortune, that is, where self-consciousness has achieved its destiny and where it lives surrounded by that destiny, then self-consciousness, which is according to the concept at first spirit and is spirit only immediately, leaves it behind; or also – it has not yet achieved its destiny, for one can equally well say both of them.” This becomes part of the background of Judith Shklar’s political theory, and, so I would argue, continues throughout her development, playing a much more significant role than the ‘liberalism of fear’ that is so often ascribed to her as her basic stance. See especially Shklar 1976; 1957.

a matter of drawing conclusions from an established theory but as a conception of what makes the life of a slave-owning member of the polis so attractive. What happens in the development of that idea, that knot in the web, is that it is so attractive, it inspires a revolt among those who are excluded from the polis or whose lives are somehow discounted by the majority. Most importantly, it develops and enriches itself such that its original sense as ‘not a slave’ becomes transformed itself in various historical struggles while it itself continues in the background as something informing current and future praxis. Just as the difference between ‘I know that P’ and ‘I know that I know that P’ is infinitesimal – what Hegel provocatively calls ‘the difference that is no difference’ – the difference between independence (as not a slave) and freedom is at first also infinitesimally small, but as it enriches itself, the differences become more complex and themselves enriched. To use once again Hegel’s preferred way of marking that distinction: Freedom and independence are *distinguishable* from each other, but they cannot be *separated*. Freedom for Hegel marks one of the major turning points in the development of the human web where a way of conceiving of the totality – of people, their relation to each other and the world itself – now has an aspiration that makes sense both universally and individually of how a better life might take shape both individually and socially. Freedom is not discovered as ‘something already there’ but as something which is worth achieving.

6 Freedom and Inertia

In his later period Sartre – of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* – put a new twist into this kind of dialectical thinking. The fundamental distinction is, as he put it in his own metaphor, that between freedom and inertia – a kind of Kantian-Newtonian metaphor. Kant thought that with regard to knowledge, the unbounded spontaneity of pure thought (as self-consciousness) had to be checked by the givenness of (both sensory and pure) intuition and that in practice that same unboundedness was checked by practical reason itself in giving itself an unconditional, unbendable law of action. The natural world, on the other hand, is Newtonian. Objects move in a straight line in space unless interfered with by something or some force outside of them. (More appropriately put, objects moving in a constant velocity of travel, that is, having no acceleration. But that is beside the point for the purpose of the metaphor.) The point is that nature acts according to laws (however complex and intertwined they may be), but human reality is that of self-consciousness and thus self-direction. Kant’s well-known formulation is that human agents (or rational agents in general) act in terms of their own concept of law and thus do not travel necessarily in ‘inertial’ frameworks. Spontaneity is, as we might put,

without any direction of travel at first, and it must be given a direction.¹³ For Kant, it is not ‘nature’ but we ourselves who set our directions. Inertial objects travel in a straight line; we travel in crooked lines, and when we do travel in a straight line (as when we obey the moral law we have given ourselves), it is because we have made ourselves do so.

Jaeggi herself uses the metaphor of inertia to explain her conception of transformative experience and action: “The conceptualization (*begriffliche Weichenstellung*) I am proposing can be summed up as follows: forms of life are inert ensembles of social practices.” (Jaeggi 2025, 109) Practices are fluid, they have a shape that shifts. ‘Practices’ manifest the spontaneity always present in human life: “[Practices] are the result of our activity, but also what makes such activity possible; they are the result of our deeds, but also the pattern of action and interpretation that shapes such deeds.” (Jaeggi 2025, 112) Practices cannot be bound to hard and fast rules. In fact, the kind of knowledge that is at work in them is often implicit and even sometimes next to impossible to make explicit. Now, in the totality of social life, various practices collect into ensembles (where I take Jaeggi to using that term in a Gramscian holistic sense of a totality of practices, themselves totalities, in relation to other totalities). Moreover, as she puts it, “the site of the changes grouped under the collective singular ‘(social) progress’ is the ensemble of social practices and institutions I call ‘forms of life.’” (Jaeggi 2025, 108)

Why should inertia be located in ‘forms of life,’ that is, ‘inert ensembles of social practices’? The obvious answer is that what are called ‘forms of life’ are what is needed to give some kind of steadiness (i.e., inertia) to what would be otherwise too free flowing activities (too spontaneous) to provide collective life with any kind of intelligible anchor. Moreover, on her terms, it is at this ‘inert’ site that moral or social progress occurs. Moral progress must take place when a form of life breaks down and transforms itself into something different. Is it that one inertia now takes the place of the old one?

If that is true, then a form of life is perhaps not best described, as Jaeggi does, as an inert ensemble of practices. At best a form of life is something that we might strive in places to *make* inert, to seem as if it were indeed a part of nature that proceeds by its own laws and that can be thrown off course only by other forces. We do that, for example, in games by both setting the rules and also training

¹³ Sartre later took this up in terms of the way in which spontaneity as ‘ontological freedom’ has not so much to give itself a law as make itself inert in order to deal with the natural world and to give itself a kind of social inertness in order to deal with the problems of collective action, but in both cases spontaneity seeks to break out of its inertia and reassert itself again. The dialectic of Sartre’s late *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is basically that between the opposition of spontaneity and inertness and the necessity of both in an adequate conception of human agency – see Sartre 1976. I tried to make sense of Sartre’s late turn to Hegel in Pinkard 2022.

ourselves to conform to them in a socially recognized way. The form of life that is the ensemble of practices – a totality of sorts – is going itself to be as much in motion as any of the other practices of which it is the ensemble. However, part of the sense of such ensembles, to pick up Sartre's turn of phrase, involves the complex ways and intelligible ways in which it is rational for agents to put limits to their spontaneity through social forms in which they make themselves inert and which they have to hold themselves to the inertia in order to accomplish their ends. The use of 'ensemble' is meant to counter the suspicion that one is taking the totality to be something like the self-enclosed system of an organism, which was the dominant metaphor of the totality that animated the post-Kantian idealists and something which she clearly rejects. But is she not tacitly assuming that there is an interest in freedom even though that was never the intended goal of history in the first place?

7 Back to Hegel Again?

Jaeggi's discussion of regression deserves a much longer discussion than I can give here. Her key view is that "regression is hence a crisis in resolving crises, a second-order problem" (Jaeggi 2025, 69), that is, a problem with our grasping what kind of problem-solving activity could really attend to our current set of what seem to be otherwise intractable problems. Such regressive moments recall Keynes' purported reply to the claim that nothing needed to be done to counter the dire effects of the Great Depression since the market would in the long run eventually right itself, to which Keynes supposedly quipped in dead earnest that in the long run we are all dead.¹⁴ Or, as Hegel also noted in his lectures in the 1820s, the idea that the market would right itself in the long run was very much like saying.

Even the plague will end, and things will return to normal, but thousands have died from it, and now everything has settled down again. "Whereas in the past the police and the government were predominantly driven by a desire to command, now the prevailing attitude is one of complacency, of not wanting to worry about anything," and "If one says: in general, equilibrium will always be restored, this is correct. But here it is just as much a matter of the particular as of the general; the matter should not be dealt with only in general terms, but individuals as particulars are the purpose and have a justification." (Hegel and Ilting 1973, vol. 4, 625 and vol. 3, 699)

Regression is a matter of refusing to accept that different terms altogether need to be put into play and that not just this or that but a form of life itself has to change. What was inert has to be set in motion again.

¹⁴ See the discussion of this in Mann 2017, and particularly his discussions of Hegel in that book.

In Jaeggi's dialectical, post-Hegelian analysis, regression is not simply the negation of progress. One cannot have an intelligible concept of progress itself unless one has also has a concept of regression, just as one cannot have a conception of correctly following the rule unless it also explains why one incorrectly deviates from the rule. Her point, however, goes deeper. Regression is also a sign of the failure of progress as it has been conceived up to that point. Regression involves the assertion of a kind of inertness in social life, something like what Wittgenstein called the image of our lashing ourselves onto 'rails to infinity,'¹⁵ which also means that, if we follow the metaphor out, when social life goes off the rails, it suggests to those caught in the picture to be because it has been sabotaged (by an elite out of step with 'the people' or by some alien element in the society) or that there has simply been a 'failure of will' to stay on the track, both of which require (for those still caught in the picture) a show of force to get back on track.

The crisis to which regression responds is such that some new solution is required, the old 'rails' (as the inertia of a form of life) don't work anymore, and a revamped set of problem-solving skills need to be brought into play. Regression is thus not just nostalgia for some lost home but a genuine blockage to learning in its attempt to get back on track either through some kind of aggressive communitarianism (of which ethnonationalism is one such device) or through some kind of semblance of moving progressively forward with an assertion of reactionary modernism (see Herf 1984). What undergoes the blockage in learning is the social whole itself – or the specific formation of self-conscious life, *Geist*, at issue – and the various individuals living out that blockage in their own lives, that is, in the form of an 'I' that is a 'We,' and a 'We' that is an 'I.' But as Hegel said in the very last lectures he gave on the subject in 1830-31, "Freedom is in that way the being in itself of self-conscious life (*Geist*); it is required to know what it is in itself; we know it; but at first *Geist* does not know it at the beginning; world history begins with this knowledge of itself; it is a work of 3000 years that the spirit has done in order to know itself ... This [1831] is how far spirit's awareness of its freedom has come, and how far the concept of freedom has developed (in world history)!" (Hegel 2005; Hegel and Vieweg 2005, 37, 241).

Maybe what it was that we were looking for has become more clear to us, and regression consists in finding new ways to deny that self-knowledge by means of relying on more primitive emotions and the particular kind of ways we have made

¹⁵ See Wittgenstein 1953, 218-9. "Whence comes the idea that the beginning of a series is a visible section of rails invisibly laid to infinity? Well, we might imagine rails instead of a rule. And infinitely long rails correspond to the unlimited application of a rule. . . . 'All the steps are really already taken' means: I no longer have any choice. The rule, once stamped with a particular meaning, traces the lines along which it is to be followed through the whole of space. – But if something of this sort really were the case, how would it help".

ourselves inert. As Jaeggi puts it, regression “is a somehow inappropriate reaction to a problem that may not be fully conscious and might even be repressed” (Jaeggi 2025, 208).

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