

Freedom as Self-Determination: The Hegelian Structure of the Will

VIOLETA LOPEZ

At first glance, freedom seems to require both an ability to reflect on our individual desires and an ability to act upon them in the world. Traditionally, many philosophers have been concerned with explaining how the will enacts this seemingly causal relationship between thought and praxis, or how the will can successfully translate intentions, desires, or thoughts (theoretical reasons)¹ into action (practical effects). Through this lens, I am free insofar as I can do what I think best without obstacles. But causal theories of the will still struggle to account for cases where our actions fail, misfire, or express something other than what the agent intended. The main problem with understanding the will causally, as a private two-step faculty, is that when the will fails to turn our intentions into our desired ends, we cannot explain or make sense of what we have done. The failure appears to be an accident or mere weakness of the will rather than an action that reflects who I am, so I cannot learn or self-actualize through my own actions. The will, then, comes to look like a mysterious causal faculty, a metaphysical power that bridges an unexplained gap between thought and

¹ The claim that “reasons are causes” is grounded in the early modern view—found in Hobbes—that “reason” explains action only insofar as it tracks causal consequences. See *Leviathan*, Part I, Chapter V (“Of Reason, and Science”).

Violeta Lopez is a senior at the University of Chicago majoring in philosophy and political science and doing a BA/MA in social thought. This fall, she will begin a PhD in philosophy at Northwestern University. Her interests include critical theory, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and post-Hegelian/Marxist thought.

action, as if they belonged to different realms. If the will is a power we cannot fully understand, how is this freedom? How might we understand the will in a way that makes every action intelligible both to ourselves and within the social world we inhabit? This question of how to make sense of the will, even in failed or contradictory action, remains central to questions about agency, autonomy, and self-actualization.²

G.W.F. Hegel offers a solution and a critique to this problem. In the *Philosophy of Right*, he gives an interpretive account of the rational will that challenges the traditional view which treats the will as if it were a causal power distinct from reason. Hegel asks instead what an action discloses about me, even when it does not align with what I thought I intended. His account is valuable because it makes the will expressive: even an action that “fails” or contradicts our intentions can still reveal something about the agent, rather than being dismissed as mere irrationality or as an accident in a causal chain. On this view, the will’s intelligibility lies in the fact that every act—regardless of its content—discloses something about who we are. To explain his departure from what other philosophers take to be a free agent, Hegel structures the will as made of three moments: the indeterminate I, the determinate I, and the self-determinate I.

The first moment refers to the distinctively human capacity to step back or abstract from our immediate inclinations and reflect, without thereby having to act on them. By stepping back from any particular desire, the will encounters itself only as the capacity to choose, which shows up as a sense of boundless possibility. In this sense, to be free is to know I can do anything, what Hegel calls a moment of “pure indeterminacy” (§5). If the will is understood only through our capacity for reflective thought, it becomes a will that says no to everything (§6). Such a will is contentless and indeterminate; by willing nothing, it mistakes freedom for needlessness and remains purely abstract negativity (§5).

The second moment follows from the first moment’s problem: it negates the indeterminacy of pure possibility by fixing on some concrete content in the world. It is about *willing*, that is, actually acting upon something determinate. To be free in this sense is to act in a way that allows a person to say, “I did this.” Yet for Hegel, this moment is also abstract, because the content of the will—its desires, reasons, or intentions—remains contingent, arbitrary, and purely subjective. The will either merely

² Some contemporary event-causal and agent-causal theories of action are challenged by what is known as the “disappearing-agent” problem: once actions are reduced to chains of mental or physical events causing bodily motions, it becomes unclear how the agent as a unified subject remains causally efficacious. See, for example, Pereboom; and Bianchi & Taillard.

executes what it has privately pre-formulated “in” its own reason, or it acts unreflectively. By treating the I’s self-given content as sufficient rather than situating action within a larger rational system,³ the second moment remains a form of pure particularity: whatever the agent happens to prefer, contingent and lacking objective grounding. It is static rather than socio-historically mediated, and so cannot amount to freedom in Hegel’s sense, which requires that the will’s content be grounded in—rather than insulated from—the objective world⁴ it acts within.

The third moment is why I focus on Hegel to develop a critique of causal self-determination: it unites the indeterminacy of the first moment with the determinacy of the second. In the third moment, the will gains independence from immediate drives, desires, and inclinations through its reflective capacity to give them rational content and, in doing so, make them “mine” (§11). In doing so, the third moment also avoids splitting thinking and acting; it can make sense of moments of apparent “unfreedom,” showing how every action can be revised and intelligibly integrated. Hegelian freedom is experiential and dynamic rather than a mechanical passage from theory to practice.

This paper is structured as follows. After explaining the three moments of the will, I contrast Hegel’s account with the traditional causal model. I then argue that Hegel’s third moment has two decisive implications: it transforms our understanding of self-actualization, and it reframes freedom as something possible only within social relations. On this basis, I contend that Hegelian freedom offers an account of an intelligible will that causal views do not provide—one in which our actions make sense both to ourselves and within the world we share with others.

1. The Structure of the Will

1.1 Speaking of the Will in Terms of Moments

A full account of what Hegel means by moments (*Momente*) would require reconstructing his dialectical method, which exceeds the scope of this paper. Still, it is important to distinguish our intuitive use of the term from Hegel’s technical one. In the context of the will, moments

³ See 1.1. for a more thorough unpacking of what this rational system means.

⁴ Objective world is what is often understood as the external world. I refrain from calling it external when unpacking Hegel’s argument because he is precisely trying to challenge the dichotomy between the internal (subjective) world and the external (objective) world.

are not temporal stages but “elements” of a rational system (§5). For the purposes of this paper, I use “rational system” to refer to what Hegel calls *Geist*.⁵ Unlike some interpreters of Hegel, I do not conceive of *Geist* as a metaphysical substance or supernatural mind.⁶ As Pippin notes, *Geist* is a “distinctly human form of mindedness”: the shared, historically developed network of norms, practices, and recognitive relations that make thought and action intelligible at all (9). Hegel’s notion of rationality is therefore more expansive than the individual, self-contained model associated with the Cartesian tradition, since it names a socio-historical activity whose development involves confronting and working through its own contradictions. I will refer to this rational system throughout the paper, since the will’s moments can only be understood as elements within this broader intelligible order.

Hegel’s dialectic is his method for systematizing how such intelligibility develops: the meaning of a concept emerges only through its relation to what seems to oppose or limit it. A moment becomes what it is by being worked through, negated, and preserved (*aufgehoben*) within a more comprehensive form. This also means that the dialectic is not an external method imposed on the will but an attempt to articulate the internal logic by which a form of agency becomes understandable. Concepts such as the self-determination of the will, therefore, do not appear as fixed, one-dimensional ideas but as processes whose truth is realized only when their partial or contradictory elements are holistically integrated into an intelligible order.

In this sense, the will’s three moments—the indeterminate I, the determinate I, and the self-determining I—should not be treated as successive psychological states but as structural components through which the will can be understood. The first two offer only partial conceptions of the will: rationality without actuality (first moment), actuality without rationality (second moment). Their unity in the third moment expresses the form of self-determination that makes the will, as a whole, rationally intelligible. I will now explain each moment in turn as an element of the will rather than as a temporal step, in order to show how Hegel resists reducing freedom either to mere hypothetical reflection or to the satisfaction of subjective desires.

⁵ Hegel’s *Geist* has been translated in various ways, including Mind, Spirit, and occasionally Spirit/Mind, depending on the edition or interpretive emphasis. I use the German term here to avoid the connotations these options introduce.

⁶ Several philosophers have read *Geist* as a metaphysical or quasi-theological substance. For instance Feuerbach, who sees Hegel’s Absolute as a disguised theology; Marx, who criticized Hegel’s “mystification” of social life; and analytic critics like Russell, who takes Hegelian Spirit to imply a kind of “mystical monism” (*page*). By contrast, I follow the non-metaphysical line: *Geist* is, as Pippin puts it, “not a thing (neither material nor immaterial), but an activity” (34).

1.2 First Moment: Pure Indeterminacy (§5)

The first moment of the will is abstract universal freedom, often associated with “negative freedom” (§5).⁷ It is *abstract* as it means being free from immediate desires, rules, or structure without fixating on any specific content or desire of the will. It is *universal* because it is the opposite of particularization or concretization of subjective agency: it doesn’t will *something* but merely *wills* in an indeterminate or unarticulated sense. It is a *negative* condition because it is contentless: empty of any particular choice or determinate mode of action. It can be understood as the uncommitted element of the will, since it keeps all its doors open. This is what negative freedom involves: to be free *from* influence or coercion rather than having determined *to* act in a particular way, which would imply relying on certain content or an action plan. It is the mere *knowing* that I can do what I please.

When Hegel frames this first moment as “the pure thinking of oneself,” he is pointing to the reflective capacity humans have as self-determining beings (§5). Human subjects can abstract from their concrete situation, distance themselves from their particular desires, and reflect on them.⁸ The pure, abstract “I” means that the content of the will is nothing more than its rational capacity in this moment. This is what makes the first moment “one-sided”: it is pure self-relation of the will with itself (§5). An example of this capacity is humans’ ability to resist and evaluate their urges—something animals cannot do. Let’s say I crave coffee, but I am trying to reduce my caffeine intake. I can “step back” from my immediate urge, abstract from any particular determination, analyze different reasons for whether I should drink coffee or not, and eventually⁹ act on that choice. Such capacity of the will to “reflect into itself” is part of what constitutes

⁷ Hobbes is often credited with giving the first systematic account of freedom. However, it was Isaiah Berlin who first articulated it as the “negative” notion of freedom. Being free in this sense means “not being interfered with by others. The wider the area of non-interference, the wider my freedom” (Berlin 4).

⁸ Harry Frankfurt’s distinction between first and second-order desires has some overlap with Hegel’s first moment of the will as the capacity to abstract from its situation. A human can reflect on which desires to endorse or refrain, unlike animals or “wontons,” who are not free to want what they want to want. Hegel, however, does not frame this “capacity for reflective self-evaluation” (Frankfurt 7) in causal or hierarchical terms but as one of the structural components of the will.

⁹ I use the term “eventually” since the first moment is not concerned with explaining the determination of the will; it is “pure indeterminacy” (§5). In this moment, freedom lies in the withdrawal from inclination, not in the action that may follow, which belongs to later moments of the will.

its freedom (§5). Humans have the universal power¹⁰ to “extinguish all particularity, all determinacy,” insofar as we can step back from particular urges and question the circumstances we find ourselves in (§5).

However, since the first moment of the will is still detached from any determination or positive content, the will remains “purely theoretical,” which makes it no will at all (§5). This is because to be a self-determining agent, I need to follow a concrete action; I need to will *something* in the “so-called external world” (§4). Every renunciation or exercise of negative freedom demands the will to fill out this “empty space” by positing something determinate as its content and object. I cannot be free by merely keeping all the doors open; I need to step into one of the rooms and lock it behind me to claim that I have willed something. This is what Hegel means when suggesting that “the will, in order to be a will, must in some way limit itself” (§6). This is where introducing the second moment to understand the will beyond its “theoretical attitude” becomes relevant (§4).

1.3 Second Moment: Particularization of the I (§6)

The second moment is the contrary of the first since it is about explaining concrete, particular freedom. The will “moves”¹¹ from being abstract and asocial to finding the need to determine itself with real, external content. Humans cannot be free without differentiating themselves in their particular circumstances. We are always-already embedded within a structure that we must recognize to show that we are not just like any other undifferentiated object in the world, but autonomous—and thus distinct—human subjects. How does this form of self-determination happen? By limiting ourselves and willing *something* specific instead of *nothing*, as in the first moment (§6). I need to choose whether I will have coffee or not. Regardless of my decision, the choice will always imply a limitation. If I decide to have coffee, I set a limit by canceling my commitment to being caffeine-free. If I do not, I also

¹⁰ Hegel calls this a “universal” power because it is a structural capacity of human self-consciousness: humans can, in principle, step back from any particular determination—any desire, impulse, or even the meaning of their own life—and reflect upon its worth. This potential to abstract from particularity is what gives the will its universality, in contrast to animals, which remain bound to determinacies they “grow accustomed to” (§5) and don’t find the need to question. Even when an animal seems to resist an urge, like a dog not taking a treat because it has been trained to wait until its owner says a key word, it is responding out of habit or conditioned training, not based on its capacity for self-reflection.

¹¹ “Moves” here should be understood dialectically—as movements of *Geist*—rather than as sequential or spatial transitions.

limit myself by missing out on satisfying my craving. Although it may be counterintuitive to associate freedom with limitation, Hegel is trying to point out how freedom requires a concrete “worldly” framework from which humans can claim their own freedom.

The first moment lacked the freedom associated with the second because it remained empty of any content that could help demonstrate how the will exercises its freedom in actuality, which is to say, in practice. To only have negative freedom is like a plant in a pot with no sunlight; unable to actualize itself because it does not engage with the material conditions that make its growth possible.¹² The capacity for “reflective thought” in the first moment only becomes tangible through concrete practice in the world, where I can say, “I did this” (§6). Thus, the will must “add” something and cannot remain indefinite. This is because as soon as I say that I can do anything I want, I immediately find myself doing something concrete; I am never withdrawn from the world. I either did have coffee or did not have coffee: both are expressions of how the will differentiates and limits itself. Paradoxically, the will cannot remain in abstraction without committing to something; in this way, freedom *from* presupposes freedom *to*.

There is no escape from determinacy since we can only be free *in relation to* something outside of our abstract sense of selves, something in the world. However, the will is still unfree in the second moment since its “determinacy”—its “practical attitude”—is solely based on arbitrary subjectivity, which makes it as one-sided as the first moment (§4). The will here sets limitations but not *self*limitations. It decides and acts, but the content of its actions comes from an alien source that isn’t determined by a reflective “I.” Let’s say I end up getting a coffee only because a friend who is studying with me convinced me to, or because I could not resist my craving at the moment. In making either of those choices, I let my will be carried away by letting either external expectations or contingent desires choose on my behalf.¹³ I had set for myself the goal to give up on caffeine to reduce my current levels of anxiety, insomnia, and jittering. From that assumption, I fail to be a self-determining agent as soon as I fail to live up to my reasons to do something and follow contingent expectations (to please a friend) or impulses (my coffee craving). This also makes these determinacies “immediate” and arbitrary rather than rational in Hegel’s sense. My decision was guided by no rational principle beyond the circumstantial need to decide. It is as if I *found* myself willing

¹² Growth here is used as a metaphor for the particularization of the will, where the will becomes concrete in determinate action.

¹³ The idea of contingent desires or external expectations ties to Hegel’s reference to determinacies with “content given by nature, or generated by the concept of spirit.” (§6)

something instead of willing something myself.¹⁴ To avoid arbitrariness, a free life requires a will guided by a system of reasons that determines itself in a way that feels “mine,” with content congruent to how I conceive myself.

Here, one might pause and question why arbitrariness and immediacy go against the freedom of the will. In other words, why can't I just be free without a rational system of principles¹⁵ orienting my actions? Why is doing whatever I want whenever I want it a form of unfreedom? Having understood that negative freedom demands something “positive,” it seems intuitive that any form of determination of the will, any “particularization of the I,” would count as self-determination. From an atomistic picture of rationality—where reasons are just subjective intentions—this appears sufficient. But for Hegel, this “positive” moment is only genuinely free if it is situated within a rational system (*Geist*), where my determinations gain meaning in relation to a universal, shared order. Hegel explains why this is the case through his account of the third moment of the will.

1.3 Third Moment: Particularity of Limitation (§7)

So far, each moment lacks the type of freedom that the other has. The third moment of the will is thus “the unity of both these moments—particularity reflected into itself and thereby restored to universality” (§7). The will is able to reflect on its particular desires and context¹⁶ (determinacies) and fold them into a broader rationale that guides its ends. A free, self-actualizing agent is always taking a speculative stance on how their decisions harmonize or do not with their developmental logic of themselves. This “restoration to universality” refers to Hegel's claim that free action requires a reason that transcends the immediacy of a subjective impulse—something that links what I want now to a more general sense of who I take myself to be in relation to others around me. If I find myself giving in to my caffeine habit arbitrarily or out of pressure, as if my will were possessed, I am acting in a way that ignores the principles I have identified as good or reasonable for me. As a result, I am alienated from my own will for failing to “be with (my)self” (§7). If I think I am free simply because I can follow any desire, then I am actually least free, because I have no agency over the basis of my actions beyond whatever contingency presents itself. In that case, my will is pure arbitrariness because what I do is just whatever happens to move *me*. I need to determine what I want in a way

¹⁴ Professor Pippin has referred in lectures to self-determination as a “will that wills itself.”

¹⁵ This rational system of principles is grounded in my explanation of *Geist* in 1.1.

¹⁶ When I say “context” I mean something like what Hegel means by “nature” (§5).

that makes sense to me within my context. Thus, self-determination for Hegel requires a rational system that transcends the limits of subjectivity, which goes back to the universality of the first moment. Humans connect with their universality when we exercise our capacity to abstract from our immediate individual circumstances when facing choices. To be free is to be *both* with oneself and at home in the world that gives our actions their meaning. Altogether, the point is that we “reflect in our particularity and restore to universality” if our action conforms to certain parameters (universal component) that are self-imposed and determined by “one’s own agency” (particularity) (§4).

It is worth noting that the third moment illustrates how neither moment one nor two on their own “constitutes the whole of freedom” (§6). The free will is not the one that refrains from all content, like in the first moment, nor the one that determines itself with alien content,¹⁷ like the second moment. It is neither freedom *from* nor freedom *to*. Instead, it is the will that can refrain from a chosen content by integrating both formal (indeterminate) and concrete (determinate) freedom into a rational totality.

Hegel says, on the one hand, that negative freedom is insufficient: humans cannot be free by remaining indeterminate and self-absorbed because we cannot escape the historical structure we live in; we cannot escape our particularity, finitude, and relationships as concrete beings embedded in a social and historical world. On the other hand, humans cannot be free if all their choices are arbitrary and based on content that relies merely on their “immediacy as a single unit” (§7). In the third moment, the will *wills* itself, since it is free by giving its particularity a rational, universal form.

2. The Causal View of the Will

Having given an account of the Hegelian will, in this section I unpack the “inner-outer” assumption that grounds causal theories of the will and then explain why this framework is insufficient for understanding it.

Causal theories of the will treat thinking and acting as fundamentally distinct. Reasoning is approached as a contemplative, inner capacity, and acting (or *willing*) as outward practical engagement in the world. For

¹⁷ Purely subjective content counts as “alien content” because it stems from my unmediated immediacy rather than from the rational system that only exists in and through community. As Hegel puts it, “the common man thinks he is free when he is allowed to act arbitrarily; but this very arbitrariness shows that he is not free” (§15). Without mediation through such a rational system, my reasons remain contingent and arbitrary.

philosophers such as Descartes¹⁸ and Hobbes, freedom is viewed as a causal relation concerning how to successfully make the will turn theoretical thoughts or intentions (inner causes) into practical action (outer effect). In doing this, this view assumes that we can pre-formulate our intentions abstractly—as if humans could detach themselves from their surroundings, with the will serving as a lever that turns them into actuality. Since there is a discrete binary distinction between cause and effect, every explanation for why I acted or exercised my will in a certain way can be traced back to this prior moment in which I intellectually formulated my intentions.

Hobbes's philosophy exemplifies this approach. As one of the main figures of the traditional causal view, he understands the will precisely as this ability to trace cause and effect: "hunting out of the causes of some effect, present or past; or of the effects of some present or past cause" (17). Hobbes's use of the term "hunting" implies a will that settles on a cause in advance, abstractly determining what should bring about the effect it takes to be its freedom. By treating intentions as static causes separate from the actual unfolding of action, we are held fully responsible for our intentions. As a result, I could defend myself by saying that even though I intended *x*, I failed to live up to *x* because of weakness of the will, so I did *y* instead.¹⁹ Although I genuinely wanted to give up on coffee, I could not because I was too weak to say no to my friend this time. Since I am causally responsible for this choice under this view, I can tell myself, "I could have done otherwise."²⁰ From this lens, weakness of the will is a form of unfreedom insofar as the action does not result from the agent's intended cause but from a competing desire that lacks a rational explanation.

As long as the view presumes an inner-outer divide, so that the agent deliberates in isolation from the world before executing their pre-formed

¹⁸ Descartes frames the will as distinct from thought when he notes that "the knowledge of the understanding should always precede the determination of the will," suggesting a causal order between understanding (cause) and the determination of the will (effect) (1–22).

¹⁹ Philosophers have long debated *akrasia*, or weakness of the will. In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle understands the akratic person as acting against their better judgment, overcome by desires or pleasures, in contrast to the self-controlled person. The contemporary philosopher Donald Davidson explains *akrasia* in causal terms, describing it as a case in which the agent "cannot understand himself" (42). Hegel, by contrast, treats the will as fully intelligible, which makes *akrasia* not possible. "Failing" to follow through—unless there were environmental impediments—shows the agent did not truly will the action, framing *akrasia* as a manifestation of an agent alienated from their own actions rather than as an inexplicable deviation.

²⁰ Pippin discusses this idea of not having the option to do otherwise (173).

plan, the will ends up as a metaphysical²¹ faculty whose actions the agent cannot make intelligible. The will is understood as a causal power rather than an expressive one: what I do is supposed to be the outward effect of an inward mental cause. Thus, when the determinacy of the act cannot be traced back to this prior plan associated with the first moment, a gap opens between what I thought I would do and what I actually do. The causal view has no resources to explain the connection—or lack of it—between cause and effect. In this framework, rationality is not treated as a systematic, socio-historical process but through an “inherently atomist” lens: reasons are viewed as purely subjective mental states (Taylor 38). As a result, particular determinations are treated abstractly, instead of as dependent moments within the totality of determinations that give each other context and significance (§3).

The causal model, then, remains confined to a rigid cause/effect binary—precisely the split that Hegel overcomes by conceiving the will as a unified, expressive structure embedded in a rational system that is not divided into inner and outer domains. I now return to Hegel’s third moment to argue that it is not a purely theoretical construction but a practical account of how agents can understand their actions and self-actualize. I then explain why this process of self-actualization is possible only within a shared social world in which individuals recognize each other not as limitations but as conditions for their own self-determination.

Implications of the Hegelian Will

From Causality to Experiential Self-Actualization

The main difference between Hegel’s account of the will and causal views is that, on Hegel’s view, the will is not a causal power separate from reason; instead, it is reason *realizing itself* in action. Hegelian freedom is not concerned with a dual relationship of causality where the theoretical attitude is on the one side, and the practical attitude is on the other. This is because “reason” is not viewed individualistically (as something an agent possesses) but as a form of “social mindedness” that develops in and through human activity (Pippin 39). Hegel criticizes viewing thinking (or

²¹ I call it “metaphysical” because it implies an inner faculty or self-contained mental power that is supposed to explain action on its own, independently of the concrete contexts in which actions occur. It relies on a hidden inner cause producing an outer effect, rather than treating the will as something that is intelligible through its relations and circumstances.

reason) as a “particular and distinct faculty” separate from the will because he rejects the possibility of thinking outside of our particular experience in the world (§5). Instead, he views the will as an *active* way of thinking that can only happen as the “I steps into existence [*Dasein*]”—as an experiential, situated I (§4). There is no uncontaminated thinking, so intentions remain provisional until actuality. This is what underlies understanding the will as “thinking *translating* itself into existence.” By treating thinking and acting as “distinguishable but inseparable,”²² Hegel’s systematic approach allows each action to reveal something about the agent, unlike causal frameworks that treat actions as outcomes resulting from previously thought intentions.

Since actions become inexplicable or are deemed irrational when they do not match the agent’s plan, the causal view of the will leaves no room for self-actualization. In other words, when our “will power”²³ malfunctions or is not “strong” enough to translate thinking into action, the agent cannot make sense of their own will. Thus, when intention and action diverge, the failure is treated as a defect of “will power” rather than as something my action might reveal about me. I become, in Hobbes’s terms, an agent whose will is “without meaning; that is to say, absurd” (28). In this picture, my action is no longer something I can retrospectively reflect on or hold myself accountable for; instead of expressing something about my will, it obscures its intelligibility, closing off the very possibility of self-understanding and self-actualization.

On the contrary, Hegel contends that humans can only understand the determination of the will by examining what we *actually* do, since it is through action that the will becomes concrete and differentiated. For example, if I said yes to getting coffee when my friend asked, it would be because “deep down” I care more about something other than my caffeine intake. Perhaps I worry about what my friend will think about me if I say no, or maybe I was not as committed as I thought to give it up fully, or maybe I value maintaining shared habits and companionship more than I realized. In setting an end and failing to pursue it in practice, I can “discover”²⁴ that my true intention was *y* and not *x*. Since the will is *in-between* things in the sense that it is *in* the world, rather than outside as an isolated, mysterious lever, it is not until I translate my intention into

²² Hegel supports this claim when he says that “These [thinking and willing] distinct attitudes are inseparable” (§4).

²³ Hegel would never use this term since he does not view the will as a separate faculty.

²⁴ I put discovery in quotation marks to not suggest that the intention is something I discover within me but rather through the action itself, in this example it is a retrospective type of understanding or “discovery.”

existence that I learn something new about my degree of commitment to certain ends. In this case, I could learn that in failing to refrain from coffee, I desired to be a loyal friend more than to commit to reducing my caffeine consumption. Intentions here are not understood as fixed but subject to the will's ongoing empirical relation to the world.

The Hegelian structure of the will tells a self-actualizing story of freedom in which *every* action is a moment of self-expression. Rather than focusing on the successful or unsuccessful completion of one's intentions or "pulling of the lever," every exercise of the will can help us understand our levels of commitment to our ends. The will is an experiential process that continuously discloses intentions. This directly opposes the view of the will as that of a mechanical transition that treats intentions as abstract and fixed rather than as tentative until the moment of expression or action. Instead of giving an account of what the fact that I failed to choose *x* says about my intentions, the causal view cannot explain what my choice of *y* reveals about myself in a way that might be consistent with my commitments. In focusing on whether a cause corresponds to the effect, this view overlooks how my "effected" action expresses or reshapes who I am. Perhaps I do care more about my friendship than I had assumed, so I could *not* have done otherwise. For Hegel, to claim, "I could have done otherwise," would be to deny what my will teaches me about myself, as if I could have been someone else who is not actually me. Every action can be rendered intelligible, so freedom is about continually making sense of oneself.

The Social Dimension of Hegel's Self-Determinate I

In addition, by situating humans in the realm of pure choice, the causal view detaches humans from their sociality—as if we could contemplate and act in a vacuum, as abstract, one-sided individuals severed from the social whole that makes the will possible. Hegel, on the other hand, contextualizes human freedom when he argues that it requires mutual recognition: "The human being . . . attains self-awareness only by regarding the other as other" (§7). In relationships such as friendships and love, he points out that we are not "one-sidedly within ourselves, but willingly limit ourselves with reference to an other" (§7). Instead of seeing the other as a threat to individual freedom, the other sets the conditions necessary for a self-determinate I. Since humans exist in a particular social world, we cannot elude their condition of relationality: the will is always-already bounded by social roles, relationships, and institutions. As noted before, Hegel's rational system of principles is not abstract or

transcendental, but a form of socio-historically situated activity. It is *rational*, not in the individualistic sense of the word, as when we say that “x person made a rational choice,” but because it is how an agent makes sense of its actions through shared, communal practices that give its life value.²⁵ It is also *universal* insofar as it is realized through practices that are not merely meaningful to self-standing individuals but to society as a whole, making it “universally valuable” (Pippin 9). Thus, to assume that isolated individuals can enact freedom is to deny that “I gain my self-consciousness only through the renunciation of my independent existence” (§158). In other words, I am free only insofar as I understand my particular will as entangled with the world, where recognizing the other is a condition for self-determination.²⁶

The causal view, in simplifying my choice to have coffee as pure weakness of the will, limits my possibility to transform my projects to encompass a less individualistic goal. This is a will that “limits itself exclusively to a *this* is the will, [it is of] the stubborn person who considers himself unfree unless he has this will” (§7). This “stubborn person” is someone whose will is rigidly attached to a particular intention and leaves its failure to achieve it inexplicable, as an unintelligible deviation of the very freedom they identify with that personal goal. The stubborn person can be said to embody the causal, atomistic will who misses how “failure” can be an opportunity to reflect on how subjective intention can be made sense of in a socio-historical context. Understanding the will as weak is to treat freedom as entirely self-contained, bound to particular intentions and ends without regard for the universal—that is, for the significance that makes my action intelligible within a world shared with others.

In contrast, Hegel’s view of the will is that of a reflective social agent. If I can render every action as an intelligible manifestation of a rational system of principles that transcends my immediacy, I can reflect on the importance of my relationships and potentially realign my intentions in a way that still feels “mine” (§4). Instead of seeing my act of getting coffee as a defeat inconsistent with my intention, I can integrate my social

²⁵ From an institutional angle, freedom is only possible in a rational society in which individuals can self-determine in ways that feel “theirs” (§144). Hegel calls this system of rational institutions “ethical life” (*Sittlichkeit*). While a full discussion of ethical life is beyond the scope of this paper, it is relevant here insofar as Hegel views love as its “natural form,” as reflected in my choice to have coffee when invited by a friend (§158).

²⁶ This is not contradictory with the prior statement that the self-determinate I has self-imposed parameters, because these “self-imposed” norms are not isolated determinacies. They emerge from a rational framework of socio-historical conditions, so particularity is intelligible only in relation to the shared practices that constitute universality; as Hegel notes, “within this context they gain their genuine significance” (§3).

situatedness into my self-determination. By, for example, deciding I will not brew coffee at home but have it when a friend invites me to a café, I reconsider my particular intention to quit caffeine in a non-static way that takes into account a broader social context, grounding my freedom in my in-betweenness rather than one-sidedly.

This is also why Hegel turns to love as an example of the third moment. Love makes explicit what can look obscure if the three moments are treated abstractly: that genuine freedom involves a self-limitation in which I step back from my abstract independence (“I do not wish to be an independent person in my own right”) while also finding myself affirmed in another (§158). Love is a unity of the first moment’s universality—my capacity to detach from my immediacy—and the second moment’s particularity—my concrete commitment to another person. A causal view, which isolates the agent from the world, would struggle to register this as freedom because it would not see how recognition and relationality can *constitute* agency rather than undermine it.

The crucial implication is that humans’ commitments are never purely private; they are constituted within a shared social world that is never “external”²⁷ to the will. This component of the sociality of freedom is what makes the third moment radically different from a view of the will that underestimates individuals’ socio-historical and affective interdependence. Hegelian freedom shifts attention away from a will viewed individualistically and in the abstract toward a will that sees freedom as an experiential process in which we are being-with-self-in-an-other.

Conclusion

Altogether, Hegel emphasizes that human freedom is about feeling unalienated and reconciled in the way we determine our will. Freedom is both particular and universal because it is to will something determinate, from one’s particular circumstances, but also to be able to reflect on such determination and “be with oneself,” appealing to a justified, broader rational system that transcends subjective dispositions (§7). It demands a type of self-relation that is intertwined with humans’ relationships with others. Hegel teaches us that there is no thinking, no self-understanding outside of experience. As a result, every action is an expressive opportunity for self-transformation: to learn from how thought translates itself into

²⁷ Hegel views the dichotomy between an internal, theoretical-subjective world and an external, practical-objective, empirical world as false. The theoretical moment is already contained within practical activity, which is why what appears “external” still remains mine (§4).

existence. Rather than a psychologically or asocial reflective faculty, as the causal view poses it, the will is practical reason realized through socio-historical contexts. A free agent is someone who continuously shapes their will in a way that feels theirs and revisits it, always recognizing that the will is embedded in—and can only be made intelligible within—a world shared with other wills.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Joe Sachs. Hackett Publishing Company, 2002.
- Berlin, Isaiah. *Two Concepts of Liberty. Four Essays On Liberty*. Oxford UP, 1969.
- Bianchi, Robin T., and Antoine Taillard. "Is There a Disappearing Agent Problem for Agent-Causals?" *Acta Analytica*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2025, 1-21.
- Davidson, Donald. *Essays on Actions and Events*. Second Edition. Oxford Clarendon Press, 2001.
- Descartes, René. "Meditations on First Philosophy." In *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Cambridge UP, 1641.
- Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Essence of Christianity*. Translated by George Eliot. Harper & Row. (Originally published 1841), 1957.
- Frankfurt, Harry G. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 68, no. 1, 1971, 5-20.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Edited by Allen W. Wood. Translated by H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Hobbes, Thomas, of Malmesbury. *Leviathan*. McMaster University Archive of the History of Economic Thought. Andrew Crooke, 1651.
- Marx, Karl. *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"*. Edited by Joseph O'Malley. Cambridge UP. (Originally written 1843), 1970.
- Pereboom, Derk. "The Disappearing Agent Objection to Event-Causal Libertarianism." *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 169, no. 1, 2012, 59-69.
- Pippin, Robert B. *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*. Cambridge UP, 2008.
- Russell, Bertrand. *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*. George Allen & Unwin. (Originally published 1900), 1937.
- Taylor, Charles. "Hegel's Philosophy of Action." In *Hegel on Action*, originally published 1983, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

