

# CORRESPONDENCE

## HEGEL AND PRUSSIANISM

TO THE EDITOR OF *Philosophy*

SIR,—The question about Hegel is not whether he approved of the specific thing called Prussianism but whether he gave his authority to the doctrine that the State is not bound by the moral law as understood by individuals.

Professor Knox makes only one passing reference to Hegel's *Philosophy of History*—a work founded on lectures delivered in or about the year 1823, i.e. somewhat later than the *Philosophie des Rechts*, and usually regarded as the *locus classicus* for this subject. In this Hegel says explicitly and without qualification much of what the Professor appears to think he did not say, or at least did not mean.

"It is possible," he says in the *Philosophy of History*, "that world-historical men may treat other great, even sacred, interests inconsiderately; conduct which is indeed obnoxious to moral reprehension. But so mighty a form must trample down many an innocent flower—crush many an object in its path. . . . What the absolute aim of the spirit required and accomplished—what Providence does—transcends the obligations and the liability to imputation and the ascription of good and bad motives which attach to individuality in virtue of its social relations. . . . Moral claims that are irrelevant must not be brought into collision with world-historical deeds and their accomplishment. The litany of private virtues—modesty, humility, philanthropy, and forbearance—must not be raised against them."

Could the decree of divorce between public and private virtue have been pronounced in clearer language? But as if to make quite sure that there should be no mistake about it, Hegel proclaims that *The Prince* of Machiavelli is "the great and true conception of a real political genius with the highest and noblest intentions."

It is, no doubt, true that by linking it up with his "logical doctrine of the universal and the particular, and his metaphysical doctrine of the infinite and the finite" (Professor Knox's words), Hegel gave a philosophical (or pseudo philosophical) veneer to Machiavelli's justification of the unscrupulous use of fraud and force in the service of the State. In the same way he contrives to present the submission of the individual to and his absorption in the State—which to an Englishman is the denial of individual liberty—as the attainment of a higher liberty through his fusion with an "universal and subjective will" supposed to be embodied in the State. (The Hegelian always tries to get it both ways when he talks of freedom.) But this mystification has only added to the mischief by giving an appearance of philosophic respectability to what in effect is a crude denial that morality, as understood by individuals, has any relevance to the conduct of States.

We have here the origin of the grandiose nonsense with which the successors of Hegel, the Treitschkes, the Bernhardis, and finally Hitler and the Nazis, have embroidered the same doctrine. It is quite possible that Hegel would have disliked these developments—very few philosophers like the application of their theories to practical affairs—but the Hegelian doctrine, descending from the classroom to the camp, was entirely acceptable to the soldiers who interpreted submission to the State as obedience to them and their kind and who had always been convinced that might was the measure of right.

Yours faithfully,

FARNBOROUGH, KENT.

J. A. SPENDER.

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## HEGEL AND PRUSSIANISM

TO THE EDITOR OF *Philosophy*

SIR,—The question is not whether "the Treitschkes, etc." have found in Hegel isolated sentences in support of their own views (the devil can quote even Scripture to suit his own ends), but whether Hegel's political theory as a whole gives, or was intended to give, any support to the view that "might is right" or that "the

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State is not bound by the moral law." This question, as I have argued in the article to which Mr. Spender's letter refers, is not to be answered by the citation of isolated passages from the *Philosophy of History* or elsewhere, but only by the study of Hegel's political theory *in extenso*.

Mr. Spender's quotations, when set in their context, do not seem to me to support his belief that Hegel gave "authority to the doctrine that the State is not bound by the moral law." In them Hegel is talking of great men and their deeds. Great men, he believes, are the unconscious tools of God's Providence, and what they really achieve (not what they *seem* to achieve) is a step forward in God's plan for the world, or, in other words, in mind's knowledge of itself, in self-conscious freedom. If you like, Hegel holds, you may judge that the great man is proud, immoral, heartless, and cruel, but these moral judgments are irrelevant because they apply only to the overt character of the great man's deed and not at all to the substance of what he effects. For instance, Caesar's opponents had the law and the constitution on their side, and his advance to autocracy was therefore technically unjust and wrong; but, Hegel argues, the foundation of the Roman Empire was an advance in civilization, an enrichment of human life, and this subsists as the substance of Caesar's achievement, be his personal immorality what it may.

Hegel holds further that at times before constitutional law is established, the great man has no option but to resort to force and violence in order to establish law and order ("mere goodness avails little against the force of nature"), and here again a moral judgment on the means used is irrelevant. Once a rational, i.e. a free, constitution is established, the right to use force has gone and changes must be brought about by constitutional means (*Philosophie des Rechts*, § 273, and *Zusatz* to § 93). Herein lies Hegel's agreement with Machiavelli, and Mr. Spender might in fairness have quoted from his own text, the *Philosophy of History*, what Hegel actually says about *The Prince* (Sibree's translation, New York, 1900, p. 403): "This book has often been thrown aside in disgust as replete with the maxims of the most revolting tyranny; but nothing worse can be urged against it than that the writer, having the profound consciousness of the necessity for the formation of a State, has here exhibited the principles on which alone States could be founded in the circumstances of the times. The chiefs who asserted an isolated independence, and the power they arrogated, must be entirely subdued; and though we cannot reconcile with our idea of freedom the means which he proposes as the only efficient ones, and regards as perfectly justifiable—inasmuch as they involve the most reckless violence, all kinds of deception, assassination, and so forth—we must nevertheless confess that the feudal nobility, whose power was to be subdued, were assailable in no other way, since an indomitable contempt for principle and an utter depravity of morals were thoroughly engrained in them."

Many writers, whom Mr. Spender might regard as less suspect than Hegel, have held that moral judgments are out of place in historical writing and that a moral judgment on a man's character is a quite different thing from, and one irrelevant to, the historical judgment on what he has achieved in public life. But still, even if this is wholly false, Mr. Spender has proved in his quotations nothing about Hegel's view of the State's relation to morality. It is precisely because Hegel holds that the State is the highest of ethical institutions that he is constrained to provide a special justification for the high-handed acts of great men and in fact regards these acts as strictly non-political. However, although as it seems to me Hegel clearly rejects the view held by "the Treitschkes, etc." of the relation between political and moral action, the question of what Hegel's own positive view on this question was is no easy one to answer, though I may say that, if I wanted to argue for Mr. Spender's answer, I would be inclined to base my reasons on Hegel's assertion (*Philosophie des Rechts*, §§ 333, 337) that though international law *ought* to be kept, the ultimate principle of the action of any State is regard for its own special welfare. Even there, however, I would have to take account of Hegel's denial (§ 337) that there is an opposition between morals and politics.

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